

Cash tolls on Miami-Dade expressways will soon be electronic

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The toll plaza on the Gratigny Parkway is expected to close June 7 to become the first South Florida toll road to stop accepting cash and begin collecting all tolls electronically.

A little more than a month later, likely in July, the Don Shula Expressway toll plaza in South Miami-Dade will close. That same day, the Snapper Creek Expressway, which links the Don Shula to U.S. 1, will charge tolls for the first time. Both roadways will collect tolls electronically.

The moves to close toll plazas on the Gratigny and Don Shula, plus installation of electronic toll collection equipment on Snapper Creek, mark a major milestone in the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority's strategy to stop collecting cash on its expressways.

Other roadways to do the same will be State Roads 112 and 836, respectively, the Airport and Dolphin Expressways. Authority officials say the 112 may go cashless in 2012 and 836 maybe in 2013.

The dates for closing the Gratigny and Don Shula toll plazas are tentative, according to authority officials. Whether officials will stick to those dates depends largely on the weather and other last-minute factors or problems.

The Homestead Extension of Florida's Turnpike from Florida City to the Broward County line is also on schedule for conversion with the 47-mile stretch going cashless next year, turnpike spokeswoman Sonyha Rodriguez-Miller said this week.

While many drivers who now pay cash will be inconvenienced, authority officials believe that commuters will reap several benefits over the long run.

Chief among them would be improved safety with elimination of the dangerous lane weaving and merging near toll plazas. Other benefits: No fumbling for change and cleaner air because there will be no fumes from idling cars at toll plazas.

In addition, officials said, all users of cashless highways will pay a toll, compared to today when many commuters use only the stretches of road that have no toll plaza. The expected increased funding will then be used on future road projects, such as extending the Gratigny eastbound to Interstate 95 and westbound to the turnpike.

Cindy Polo-Serantes, a Miami-Dade Expressway Authority spokeswoman, told El Nuevo Herald that her agency is planning a major public outreach campaign in newspapers, radio and television to advise drivers that the cashless era is just down the road. "Our outreach is going to start picking up now," Polo-Serantes said in outlining the campaign to ensure commuters are not surprised with the start of the cashless era this year.

Polo-Serantes said the authority also plans public meetings at colleges and community centers in the next few months to get the word out.

While SunPass, a transponder widely available at supermarkets, will be the preferred method of toll collection, authority and turnpike officials said commuters also will be able to pay through a system called toll-by-plate.

Under this system, drivers can register vehicle license plates in advance at certain locations and then pay bills in cash or credit and debit cards at sales outlets like supermarkets.

Bills for toll-by-plate customers will be based on photographs of the plates of registered vehicles passing beneath gantries that hold cameras and other electronic toll collection equipment.

SunPass customers generally have prepaid debit and credit card accounts.

Tolls on authority and turnpike roads are fixed, in contrast to tolls on the express lanes of I-95 that vary according to congestion levels on the express lanes.

Read more: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/03/23/1542836/cash-tolls-on-miami-dade-expressways.html#ixzz0jaYzf9zg>