

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY DECEMBER 9, 2016 5:43 PM

Toll revenue surges on Miami-Dade expressways — up 80 percent in just two years



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Motorist money continues to surge on Miami-Dade expressways, with toll revenue up 82 percent in 24 months on the heels of expanded tolling in late 2014.

A financial report released this week by the Miami-Dade Expressway shows its system of five highways generated \$235 million in toll revenue in the 12 months that ended July 1. That's up 28 percent from 2015, when MDX expanded tolling to all of its exits on the Dolphin and Airport expressways. That "closing of the system" sparked a backlash among motorists and local politicians, who have used the higher tolling to make MDX a favorite punching bag.

The financial report offers a detailed look at the impact of the expanded tolling, since 2016 is the first fiscal year to have 12 months of expanded tolling. (The expanded tolling began on Nov. 15, 2014, about four-and-a-half months into the 2015 fiscal year.) Between 2014 and 2016, toll revenue surged by about \$105 million, an 82 percent increase.

MDX uses toll revenue to maintain and expand some of Miami-Dade's busiest highways, and dollars from motorists mean no tax revenue goes into covering the costs. Run by a board filled with county and state appointees, the authority pitched the expanded tolling as a way to spread the expenses more fairly, since entire segments of the Dolphin could be driven without paying any tolls before the change.

The 2016 figures capture that freebie dynamic. The Dolphin, MDX's busiest expressway, accounted for 44 cents of every toll dollar the authority collected in 2014. In 2016, the Dolphin's share jumped to 61 cents of every dollar collected.

Backlash against expanded tolls was strong enough that in the summer of 2015 MDX created a new rebate program for its most frequent motorists. Checks recently went out for 2016 participants, who received back 30 percent of what they paid into the system through June 30.

In its 2016 financial report, MDX allocated \$5.5 million for the rebates. That's almost 2.5 percent of its toll revenue for the year.

(To participate, drivers must spend at least \$100 on tolls each year on MDX highways, which include the Gratigny, Snapper Creek and the Don Shula expressways. Registration for the 2017 rebates starts in January for new participants. Information can be found on MDX's website.)

Mario Diaz, an MDX spokesman, noted the 2014 tolling changes came with lower rates. He said that amounted to more than half of the Dolphin drivers paying less in tolls now than they did in 2014. “Those who paid nothing are now paying something,” he said.

He also cautioned against attributing the surge in toll revenue solely to the expanded tolling. He said MDX’s improvements, including expansion of the Dolphin and interchange projects, have made the expressways easier to use. That, in turn, has generated more MDX revenue to fund future projects.

“It’s not just that we closed the system,” he said. “We completed more projects that allowed for traffic to flow better on the expressways.”

Among other notable numbers in MDX’s 2016 Comprehensive Annual Financial Report:

- The MDX is generating so much extra cash that it enjoys a much stronger financial position than it did a few years ago. In 2014, it had about \$12 of debt for every dollar of yearly operating revenue it brought in, and almost all of MDX’s revenue comes from tolls. In 2016, MDX had \$6.74 of debt for every dollar of operating revenue — even as MDX’s debt of \$1.6 billion stayed flat during those 24 months.
- MDX motorists paid an average of \$628,000 in tolls per day in 2016. That’s up from \$346,000 a day in 2014.
- The Dolphin Expressway, also known as State Road 836, generates more revenue than all of the other MDX expressways combined. The Dolphin accounted for about \$139 million in toll revenue in 2016. The second-highest source of tolls came from the \$38 million that the Don Shula (SR 874) generated.

On Saturday, Diaz released a statement that read: “MDX made a commitment to the public to fund crucial projects and complete them within five years. We are keeping that promise. Those projects are currently underway on budget and on time. Construction will be completed by 2020 instead of having perpetual construction over the next 15 to 20 years.”



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