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SunPass alternative unveiled

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As the end of the toll plaza era approaches, those who want -- or need -- to continue paying cash may be wondering how they will be able to use the roads once coins and paper bills are no longer accepted.

Toll road managers have developed an alternative -- the Toll-by-Plate program.

It does not require people to sign up for SunPass, an electronic device motorists attach to their windshields to pre-pay tolls.

The new program is scheduled to start in two phases, beginning next year at the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority and in 2011 on the Homestead Extension of Florida's Turnpike.

Toll-by-Plate customers in 2010 will be able to pre-pay their accounts in cash, check or credit and debit cards at thousands of locations, including convenience stores and supermarkets.

They can pay online if they have a credit or debit card. Starting in 2011, drivers will be able to pay in cash after they get bills in the mail.

But Miami-Dade Expressway Authority and turnpike officials said as many drivers as possible will be encouraged to sign up for SunPass because tolls on that system will continue to be at the lowest rate.

Toll-by-Plate is the latest step toward the eventual demolition of toll plazas on major urban expressways in South Florida to decrease traffic congestion and improve traffic safety.

But officials are well aware that not everyone will sign up for SunPass because they want -- or have to -- continue paying cash. "No matter what we do, we are not going to have 100 percent penetration with SunPass," said Jim Ely, chief executive officer and executive director of Florida's Turnpike Enterprise.

NEW PROGRAM

Ely and Miami-Dade Expressway Authority Executive Director Javier Rodríguez outlined the program during a recent meeting with The Miami Herald's editorial board. Toll-by-Plate is aimed at the relatively small number of motorists expected to continue using the toll roads without SunPass.

"How that will work is, for those who do not have a [SunPass] transponder, we take a video snapshot of your license plate and send you a bill," said Ely. "On top of that bill, there will

have to be some minimal service fee . . . around \$2.50 to \$3 . . . monthly, to cover our costs."

The Turnpike will focus its advertising efforts in Miami-Dade to encourage motorists to sign up for SunPass in advance of total conversion to electronic tolling.

Next year, after the toll plaza is torn down on the Gratigny Expressway, open-road tolling will be gradually extended to all other Miami-Dade Expressway Authority roads, including State Roads 874, 878, 836 and 112.

Don Shula (874) and Snapper Creek (878) will be converted in mid 2010 and 836 and 112 in late 2012.

At the same time toll plazas vanish on MDX roads, the Turnpike also will be converting its South Florida toll road to open-road tolling.

TURNPIKE

On the Turnpike system, the Homestead Extension is the first to be targeted by early 2011 from Florida City to Miramar.

Another phase is expected from the Golden Glades interchange to Interstate 595 by 2014.

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