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# Tolls on 836, 112 have driver tempers flaring

## HIGHLIGHTS

New tolls have increased the cost of driving on two Miami-Dade County expressways, but authorities say it's too soon to tell if drivers are being pushed to surface streets.



BY GLENN GARVIN

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It may take a full year to evaluate how a new toll system on State Roads 836 and 112 has affected traffic, expressway authorities say, but the effect on motorists' tempers is pretty clear: They're flaring.

"An abuse of power!" fumes Coral Gables architect Maria Luisa Castellanos. "Taxation without representation." says Jim Angleton, who owns a cluster of financial services scattered across Miami-Dade: "They're taxing the crap out of people."

The new tolling system took effect in mid-November, when the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority (MDX), taking advantage of advances in technology, began charging for every entrance and exit on 836 and 112, the county's two major east-west arteries.

Previously, there were many loopholes in the system that allowed some motorists to travel miles without paying tolls. And all westbound traffic traffic was free. But now every car traveling on the two roads is paying a toll.

"Tolls! Tolls! Tolls! Tolls everywhere!" exclaims Elizabeth Gonzalez-Tejedor, a Miami paralegal who now pays six different tolls a day commuting from her home on Coral Way to Miami Lakes.

Though tolls on many trips went down, some skyrocketed. "It's crazy. Gas is going down but what we're saving on gas we're spending on tolls."

Actually, many individual tolls went down in the new system. For instance, a driver who travels on 836 between Florida's Turpike and State

Road 826 (the Palmetto Expressway) — that's about 45 percent of the traffic on 836, according to MDX — used to pay 75 cents for the eastbound trip. Now it's down to 70 cents.

But because those drivers now have to pay in both directions, the cost of a round trip is now almost double, to \$1.40.

And for a motorist who traveled for free by taking advantage of the system loopholes, the cost has skyrocketed. A car traveling west on 836 from downtown to 87th Avenue, nearly seven miles, paid nothing under the old system. That fare is now \$1.40 each way.

"Overall, they've raised tolls 54 percent," says Carlos H. Garcia, a Kendall advertising executive who heads RollBackTolls.com, a consumer group that's battling the increase. "It used to be 11 cents a mile to travel those roads and now it's 17 cents a mile. That's why people are deserting them in droves..."

"I've been avoiding the 836 since they raised the tolls, but I took it today for the first time just to see if anything had changed. And I was shocked at how well the traffic is moving, because there are so many less cars."

MDX spokesman Mario Diaz agrees that the overall toll rate for 836 is 17 cents a mile, but that rate would apply only to a relatively small group of commuters who use it end to end, traveling the full 15 miles from west of Florida's Turnpike to Biscayne Boulevard on the bay.

"Most people drive smaller segments at a lower rate," he said. "You have to look at expressway traffic as a bell curve, with a small amount of people traveling a long distance, a small amount traveling a really short distance, and the big majority in the middle," he said.

As for whether the tolls are pushing cars off the expressways and onto surface streets, Diaz said, it's too soon to tell. In the short term, traffic volume can be distorted by construction and accidents. And figuring out the real level of traffic traveling 836 and 112 before the new tolling system went into effect poses a particularly nettlesome problem, he added, because there was no way to count vehicles using the loopholes.

"I'm not sure we're going to have a really good grasp of it until a year has passed, when we know how many cars there were on the first day and how many cars there were on the 365th day," Diaz said. But, he added: "We have noticed normal traffic levels on the expressways."

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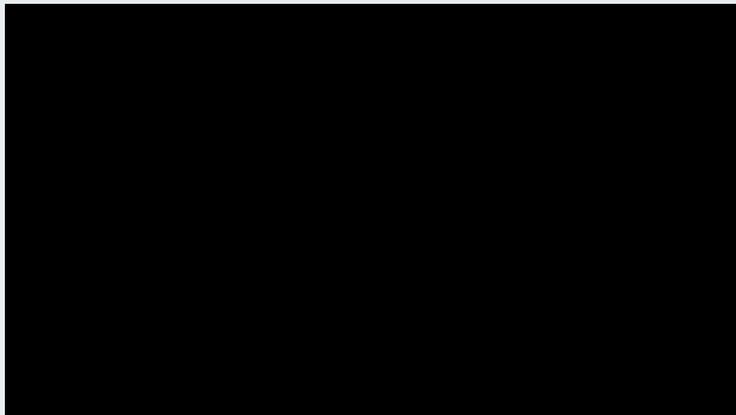
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