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TRAFFIC & TRANSIT / New cameras nab toll scofflaws / The real-time technology has caught eight on the most-wanted list since August

By ALEXIS GRANT
 Staff

The Harris County Toll Road Authority is nabbing drivers who owe thousands of dollars in tolls using a new technology that signals when repeat offenders enter the tollway.

Cameras stationed at busy toll lanes send e-mail alerts to county dispatchers when one of the top 500 scofflaws - who owe between \$2,000 and \$30,000 - drives through an EZ Tag lane without paying.

"We put them in jail," said Randy Johnson, an assistant chief in the Harris County Precinct 5 Constable's Office who is assigned to the toll roads.

"If they owe a lot of money, we don't write them a ticket. We arrest them and tow their car."

Johnson and his crew have arrested eight drivers on the most-wanted list since the authority began testing the cameras in August.

They started with just one of the \$28,000 cameras, and now use four, and hope to install the technology at more high-traffic toll lanes by the end of this year for a total of 24, said Fred Phillipson, assistant director of services for the Toll Road Authority.

"People tend not to repeat the process if there's a negative involved," he said.

He said he believes the cameras will pay for themselves in toll and fee collections.

The authority previously depended on collection agencies to persuade scofflaws to pay up, or on the sheer luck of pulling over a repeat violator.

Most cameras stationed on toll roads take photos of vehicles that fail to pay upon entering, so the county can mail them tickets.

The new cameras contain software listing top violators' license numbers so when one of those vehicles is photographed skipping a toll, a dispatcher at a control center receives a real-time message and can alert an officer in the area.

"Instead of relying on patrol vehicles to drive around, it puts all the traffic through the filter and finds the wanted vehicle," said Jim Tuton, CEO of American Traffic Solutions Inc., which runs the camera system for the county.

Tuton said Harris County is the only county in the country that uses real-time cameras, since his company, which is the first to offer them, has only rolled them out here.

The technology allows deputies to focus on catching repeat violators while they're still on the toll road illegally so they can be arrested and charged criminally. Scoflaws tracked down at home, where they have ignored ticket after mailed ticket, face only civil charges.

Drivers can be caught on camera twice with no penalty. The third violation in a year results in a fine including the amount of the unpaid tolls, plus an administrative fee for each violation. More fees are added once the bill is turned over to a collection agency or court.

So frequent violators can end up owing thousands of dollars, as much as 10 times what the tolls would have cost.

"We give these people plenty of chances," Phillipson said. "That's why these fines and fees get to be added up into the thousands. People just ignore us, ignore the collections avenue and continue to violate."

Drivers who are arrested are kept in jail until they pay that ticket or post bail. The county still has to rely on collection agencies or civil action to collect the previous balance.

Some violators skip paying in the same place at the same time every day, which has tipped off officers about where and how to find them.

The list of license plates identified by the cameras can be changed at any time, which makes the technology useful for other purposes as well, including tracking stolen vehicles.

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TOLL OR TIME

Drivers who routinely fail to pay on Harris County toll roads can face arrest when they're caught by deputies using a new technology.


Top violators: The county is focusing on catching scofflaws who owe between \$2,000 and \$30,000.

Pay up: Drivers who have outstanding fines can pay by calling the Harris County Toll Road Authority at 281-875-3279 or online at www.hctra.com.

SOURCE: Harris County Toll Road Authority

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