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# Lee speeds up toll plazas

New camera system expected to ease backups

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Drivers will pass faster through Lee County toll plazas because of a \$1.8 million computerized system that will ticket violators, render toll arms useless and keep prepaid lanes moving.

The system will be installed during the next two years at all three Lee County toll locations — Sanibel, Cape Coral and Midpoint bridges. Commissioners voted Tuesday to give the \$1.86 million contract to install the system to VESystems Corp.

It will use cameras mounted in toll lanes to identify violators and take pictures of their license plates. Those pictures are transmitted to a toll enforcement officer at the LeeWay Service Center. Then, the system distinguishes whether a warning letter or uniform traffic citation will be sent to the vehicle owner.

Currently, gates that rise to let drivers through when a toll is paid are the only way of deterring toll violations. The new system will mean gates will stay up all the time, said Carol Goldwasser, Lee County toll facilities director.

The only gates that currently stay open for a period of time are on the Midpoint Bridge, where they're lifted during peak traffic. And that's sometimes the cause of toll violations.

"We can track violators manually right now, but it's very labor-intensive and not the most effective system," Goldwasser said.

Commissioner John Albion said the system has needed the update since transponders — electronic devices that let drivers prepay tolls — were implemented in 1998.

"It's a natural part of our electronic toll collection system; this is actually the last piece to be installed," Goldwasser said.

"No matter where it is, on the Turnpike, in Tampa, Orlando, Miami, they already have this equipment for their toll lanes. This is pretty standard technology."

The Illinois Tollway, for instance — with more than 274 miles of roadways and nearly 500 toll lanes —



• Afternoon rush-hour traffic heads west toward Cape Coral through one of the unmanned lanes on the Cape Coral Bridge on Tuesday. A new system will eliminate the need for toll gates. *TODD STUBING/The News-Press*

### INFORMATION

- The first toll plaza to get the new system is the Midpoint Bridge, which is expected to be ready by winter. The Sanibel Causeway will be done during its ongoing toll plaza construction, which could be at least 15 months.
- Cape coral Bridge will be updated during its construction within the next 12 months. Four dedicated, gateless express lanes for transponder traffic are to be installed there.

### TRANSPONDERS

- Transponder batteries can be replaced for free at the LeeWay Service Center at 1366 Colonial Blvd. in Fort Myers. The current toll collection system, as of six months ago, can detect a weak transponder battery so that its owner can be notified. Since then, more than 3,000 batteries have been issued at the LeeWay Service Center.

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has a similar automated camera system that has attracted visits from road officials from a handful of other states, Illinois Tollway spokeswoman Joelle McGinnis said. More than \$40 million in tolls and fines have been recovered from toll violators since the conversion to the latest system began in 2002, McGinnis said.

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The cameras not only serve as an effective way of recovering unpaid tolls and keeping traffic flows smooth, they also deter many would-be toll violators — about 3 percent of all drivers, toll officials said.

"We consider it a success here in Illinois," McGinnis said of the camera system. "It's all about ensuring all drivers pay their fair share."

An average of 125 citations per month were issued in Lee County last year for toll violations, Goldwasser said. Toll plaza attendants have to write down license plate numbers when possible and send them in.

Drivers blowing through toll booths without paying isn't as much of a problem as the traffic congestion on Lee County's toll bridges. However, toll violations do have an indirect effect on traffic.

Here's why. Currently, when a manual toll is paid, a gate lifts to let the car through. "But drivers crashing through the gates hasn't really been a problem," said Rachel Diaz, a Cape Coral toll supervisor.

The problems come when a driver's transponder account is empty, the transponder battery is low, or the account hasn't been annually renewed. That means an attendant has to come over to the vehicle, try to determine what the problem is, get a manual toll payment if possible, and give information to the driver needed to get the transponder fixed.

That entire time, traffic is stalled in that lane.

"If you have rush hour in the middle of the afternoon, with bumper-to-bumper traffic and two collectors on the lanes, it can really hold up traffic," Diaz said. "This system will help out a lot in that sense. And I think people will become more involved (in updating transponder accounts)."

Under the new toll violation enforcement system, if the transponder doesn't work and a driver passes through without paying, a picture still will be taken. And the driver will know if it happens, because an alarm will sound, as it does now.

Details haven't been worked out, but here's an example of what might happen if your transponder isn't working properly, Goldwasser said.

A driver accidentally goes through the toll booth without paying. A warning letter then is sent to the owner of the car, reminding the owner to make sure the transponder is working properly.

On the second, third or fourth occurrence, where a vehicle shows a pattern of violations, then a \$100 to \$156 citation eventually will be issued.

That goes for toll scofflaws, too.

"So there's no advantage to blowing through the toll for a dollar to wind up with a traffic citation," Goldwasser said.

Lehigh Acres resident Russ Franklin, 32, uses the Sanibel Causeway and supports cameras in the toll booths.

"It worked like that in the Pennsylvania system," he said. "You have to do something to keep up with the traffic."

— Staff writer Grant Boxleitner contributed to this report.

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