

Thousands hit with toll lane citations

 zevyaroslavsky.org/news/thousands-hit-with-toll-lane-citations

November 27, 2012



L.A.'s first toll roads are up and running, but don't venture in without a transponder. Photo/Los Angeles Times

The free ride is over for thousands of motorists who've been driving in Los Angeles' [first toll lanes](#) without paying their way.

The new ExpressLanes on the 110 Freeway opened November 10, and as of Monday, Metro had mailed 12,297 citations to motorists caught on camera without the required FasTrak transponders. Collectively, the first batch of toll lane scofflaws owes \$18,358 in outstanding fees—a total that's expected to rise as more citations go out in the weeks ahead.

That's the bad news. The good news is that, for now, offenders are only being asked to fork over enough to cover their tolls. They aren't yet being hit with any fines for rolling into the new pay-as-you-go fast lanes that used to be reserved solely for carpoolers and motorcyclists. (They continue to ride for free but, like everybody else who uses the new lanes, still need to have a transponder. Here's [how to get one](#). Read more about the rules of the road [here](#) or consult the project's [Frequently Asked Questions](#) page.)

The Metro fines for those driving in the lanes without a transponder—\$25 plus a \$30 penalty if you pay late—kick in beginning December 10, when the pilot program hits the one-month mark. In addition, the California Highway Patrol has the authority to issue tickets of \$401-plus for solo drivers who evade fares by placing their transponders on a carpool setting, and penalties of at least \$154 for those driving in the lanes without the device. (To help CHP officers know who to pull over, there are sensors along the 11-mile route, along with beacons to signal to officers whether cars have transponders and whether they're set to correctly reflect how many people are in the vehicle.)

As motorists adjust to a huge change in L.A.'s freeway culture, there's a certain amount of confusion out there, said CHP Sergeant Terry Liu, ExpressLanes supervisor for the agency.

“A lot of [drivers] don’t understand that every vehicle has to have a transponder regardless of whether or not you satisfy the car pool requirement,” Liu said. “We are seeing people crossing over the double white lines, and then, when we pull them over, we notice they have no transponder.”

At this stage, Metro’s primary goal is not to punish violators but to get more people on board with the program, said Stephanie Wiggins, the project manager for Metro.

“When we send out the [toll citation] notices, we also send out an application” to get a transponder and set up an account, Wiggins said. “If they apply, they can get a waiver of the penalty. We want good customers, good transactions. It’s partly a marketing tool.”

Wiggins says the fine-free grace period also is an attempt to acknowledge that, despite outreach efforts, there was no way for Metro to engage the attention of every potential driver on the busy freeway. She also said that some confusion was to be expected initially. Once drivers start receiving citations and word spreads, she expects more people to fall in line. An electric sign with travel times and toll amounts, due to be unveiled this week, should also help ease some of the confusion.

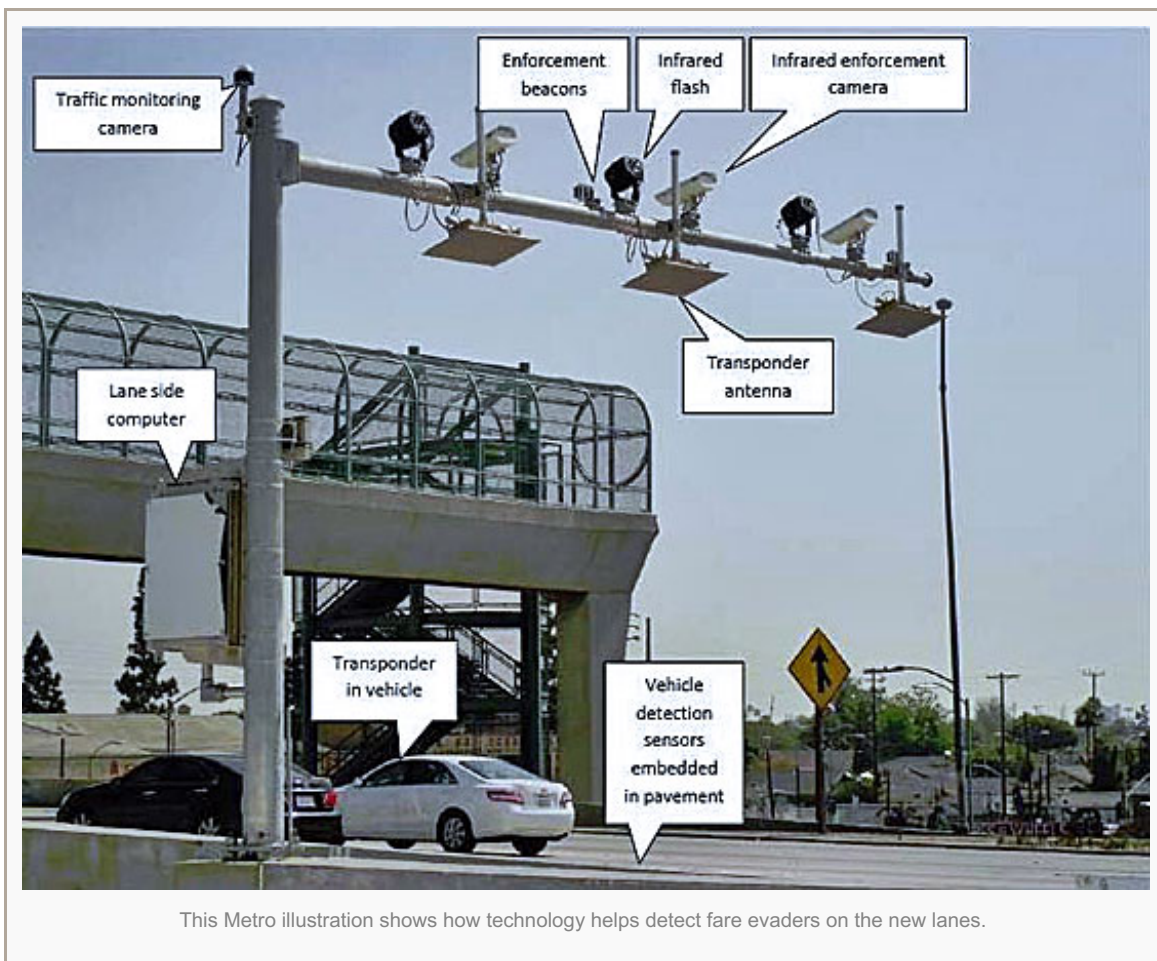
There’s no way to immediately determine how many violators are gaming the system or are merely confused. Wiggins noted, however, that some of the citations are going to repeat toll lane offenders. But not for long, she predicted.

“Once they get tickets and understand that we do have a way to monitor them, we expect more compliance,” she said.

Overall, Wiggins said, traffic speeds in the ExpressLanes have exceeded the agency’s goal of 45 miles per hour. In fact, average speeds during peak traffic have been 63 miles per hour in the northbound lanes and 58 miles per hour in the southbound lanes, she said.

However, traffic in the free lanes has gotten more congested, she added, attributing the problem in part to motorists slowing down to try figure out the new program.

The toll lanes on the 110 run from the 91 Freeway to Adams Boulevard in downtown L.A. In January, 14 additional miles of ExpressLanes are set to open on the 10 Freeway between the 605 Freeway and Alameda Street downtown.



Posted 11/27/12

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