



LOCAL 10 INVESTIGATES

# South Florida drivers feel they're spending more money on tolls

Drivers say tolls don't necessarily help them reach destination any faster

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**MIAMI** - Drivers throughout South Florida have said no matter where their daily commute takes them, they feel they're spending more money, more often on tolls.

Local 10 News spoke to several drivers who said the tolls are another expense and don't necessarily help them reach their destination any faster.

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"Three hundred to four hundred (dollars) a month," Maribel Masvidal estimated she spends commuting from Homestead to her job in South Miami. "A lot of money that could be used on other things for my family."

Masvidal said that commute can take her up to two hours one way on a given day.

Property manager Oscar Borrás told Viteri his work takes him all over Miami-Dade County and he spends up to \$250 a month on tolls.

"It's like every exit you get off on, you're more likely getting hit with a toll," he said.

Drivers have not imagined the increase. In 2012, the Florida Department of Transportation made nearly \$609 million in tolls, a 1.5 percent increase from the year before. In 2015, the FDOT brought in \$866 million in tolls, a 9 percent increase in a year.

Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, or MDX, oversees five major roadways in the county: State Road 112/Airport Expressway, State Road 836/Dolphin Expressway, State Road 874/Don Shula Expressway, State Road 878/Snapper Creek Expressway and State Road 924/Gratigny Parkway.

In 2010, MDX tolls brought in \$112 million, a decrease of 1.1 percent from the year before. But in 2015, toll revenue surged to nearly \$183 million, a 42 percent increase from a year earlier.

In their financial report for 2015, MDX credited the revenue boost to converting the last two expressways, the Dolphin and Airport expressways, to open road tolling.

A representative told Local 10 News that the toll rates allowed the agency to finish five major construction projects in a five-year window.

"If we do nothing, there will not be a highway in Miami-Dade County that will not have a toll on it," said critic Chris Wills, who launched the petition "No More Tolls."

It's a push to change state law to allow people to vote on tolls.

In 2013, MDX approved policy authorizing it to automatically increase tolls in the future based on inflation -- an option officials said they'll revisit in the next few years.

MDX Board Chairman Louis Martinez voted against the plan, and in 2015 Miami-Dade County commissioners signed a resolution asking MDX to lower or cap tolls and not tie future increases to inflation or the consumer price index.

"Our salaries don't necessarily go up with cost of inflation, so it makes no sense," Masvidal said.

But officials said neither MDX nor Florida's Turnpike receives tax dollars -- they are solely funded through tolls. Interstates like I-95, however, do get gas tax funding. That funding does not go toward the controversial express lanes currently expanding into Broward County and paid for with a congestion-based toll.

"It basically gives us a management tool for trying to keep at least two lanes in the entire corridor free flowing at all times," explained Chad Huff with Florida's Turnpike Enterprise.

FTE oversees tolling on state DOT roads. But drivers said congestion-based tolls don't always work and with cameras rolling, Viteri found after paying the maximum price cap of \$10.50 to get on the express lanes in Miami-Dade County, traffic soon came to a standstill, even as general lanes flowed freely.

"You ask yourself is it worth paying that amount of money?" driver Luis Mujica said.

Based on volume, officials could have to reassess the maximum price. When asked if the price could double or even triple, officials could provide no answer.

"I can't speculate what the future's going to hold," Huff said. "I can't speculate. I'm not in the business of trying to tell the future."

Huff added drivers forget there is no such thing as a free road and many prefer tolls to taxes because they pay only for what they use.

"Using a toll road is a choice," he said. "There is always a free alternate to the toll road."

Some drivers said those alternate routes are becoming more scarce. Between congestion and cost, their commute has reached a breaking point.

"Eventually (I) do want to move more north and even out of Miami-Dade, period," Masvidal said. "Because the traffic situation is so -- it's horrendous."

Martinez declined to be interviewed for the story, but provided the following statement:

"MDX's revenue goes toward paying back the bonds which allows us to move 35 projects forward over the next 5 years. This also allows for the maintenance of 127 bridges and more than 220 lane miles of expressway with the highest safety ratings in the nation. The board voted in 2013 to set a toll rate that allowed MDX to complete 5 major construction projects within a 5-year window. The other option to set the toll rate at a 10 ¢ lower rate would have prevented several crucial projects and almost triple the years of project construction impacting daily commuters and commerce. MDX also found a solution that was outside the box by creating the innovative Cash Back Toll Dividend Program. With this program and revenue collected above and beyond what is needed on a yearly basis is given back to members of the program. Last year 38,000 qualifying members saved 30 percent after receiving their cash back. MDX also caps the toll rate for multi axle vehicles with a SunPass, making it one of the most freight friendly in the nation.

"Once the bond debt is paid off over the next 30 years or sooner, future MDX boards will have the financial flexibility to further address the community's transportation needs. In the meantime we are currently leveraging MDX strength as an agency to deliver the most effective transportation program for our community in partnership with Miami-Dade County, municipalities and the

Florida Department of Transportation. As the community continues to grow over the next 10 to 20 years, MDX looks to be part of a holistic approach working with our community leaders on innovative solutions to facilitate enhanced transit systems along existing corridors to provide commuters with multi-modal choices."

The toll petition needs nearly 700,000 signatures statewide (<http://www.nomoretolls.us>) to get the issue on the ballot.

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