

# Countdown continues to toll booth removal from Thruway

Exit 26 in Rotterdam among first to get overhead framework installed for cashless electronic system

John Cropley | March 8, 2020

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The framework for the state's new cashless electronic toll system is being installed at Exit 26 of the Thruway. PHOTOGRAPHER: MARC SCHULTZ / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

ROTTERDAM — The first pieces of the of all-electronic Thruway tolling system are in place in the Capital Region, with the installation of overhead steel framework in Rotterdam and southern Albany County.

A total of 70 of these gantry structures will be installed statewide and equipped with cameras and plate readers over the next several months.

One night late in 2020, all the toll booths will be closed and DO NOT STOP signs posted on them. All motorists will then pay their tolls via mailed bills or through the Thruway Authority's preferred means: E-ZPass.

"Our primary goal is to improve mobility and reduce travel times for customers," said Eric Christensen, deputy director of operations for the authority.

The gantries installed at Exits 21B and 22 the night of Feb. 25-26 were the first to be erected this year at part of the \$355 million project.

The gantry at Exit 26 in Rotterdam was partly erected Tuesday night. The one-night installation was suspended because of high wind and completed Wednesday night.

On Thursday afternoon, Christensen walked The Daily Gazette through the Exit 26 work zone and explained the steps of the project, which will change the way the system has operated since its first pieces were built in the 1950s.

## HOW IT WORKS

The gantry is a 23-foot high overhead framework of 48,000 pounds of American-made steel fabricated in western New York, holding an array of E-ZPass scanners and license plate cameras.

A communications building alongside will relay the data these devices collect to a central processing facility.

As soon as the electronic gear is connected, it will be tested in tandem with the nearby toll booths, which will remain staffed and in operation during the interim. This sort of test run will be done at each exit, to make sure the gear works properly.

Once all 70 gantries are erected and 2,000-plus scanners are installed on them and functioning correctly, they'll all be tested as an interconnected network for 30 days.

Late one night toward the end of 2020, the Authority will take the cashless system live all at once, and within a few hours, motorists will no longer be able to pay cash.

Once the cashless rollout is complete, the toll plazas will be posted with a 20 mph speed limit and with signs instructing motorists not to stop. Exit by exit through the first three quarters of 2021, the toll booths will gradually be demolished and the driving lanes widened and realigned where the toll booths previously stood.

When the work is complete, the speed limit below each gantry will be raised as far as safety and design standards allow.

#### THE GOAL

Christensen said eliminating toll booths has cut commuting times by up to 200 minutes a year in the few locations where the Thruway Authority has already begun using it, on the outskirts of New York City and north of Buffalo. Fuel waste and tailpipe emissions have been reduced in the process.

"Here in Schenectady, we have certain delay points, and cashless tolling is going to eliminate them," Christensen said. "Exit 24 and Exit 25 are the biggest choke points. Exit 25 has one of the biggest commuter interchanges in the entire Thruway system."

The new design of each exit may vary considerably from the next, based on layout. The three toll booth lanes at Exit 26, for example, will become two driving lanes with 10-foot shoulders. A center median of flexible plastic rods will provide a visual barrier to prevent wrong-way driving and resulting head-on collisions.

A busier toll plaza (such as Exit 24, the busiest of all) will get steel or concrete dividers between incoming and outgoing traffic.

And the widest toll plazas won't even get the gantries — they'll be erected nearby, above the Thruway itself.

One thing that won't be added is more lanes. Doing so would invariably lead to more weaving and merging between lanes by drivers who believe each split-second saved is a victory.

"It's great we have traffic flowing through faster, but we need to keep it safe at the same time," Christensen said. "Because mobility has a safety factor involved, not just a convenience factor. Less weaving, you have less accidents. There's accidents that happen all the time when people merge. When you eliminate that merge, then these fender benders are reduced."

## END OF AN ERA

The arrival of all-electronic tolling of course means the departure of toll booth attendants, who for decades were the first, last and sometimes only human being motorists have interacted with on a Thruway trip.

Their ranks have diminished greatly since E-ZPass was introduced in 1993. In November 2019, the last month for which statistics are available, motorists using toll tickets and cash made 21,468,181 trips on the Thruway while E-ZPass holders made 17,103,377 trips.

To a large extent, full-time toll collectors have been replaced by part-timers. The Thruway Authority wouldn't provide a tally of its toll-collection staff for this story, nor say how much they cost in salary and benefits. Both statistics are likely changing frequently as the job title nears extinction; the pay rate for a senior full-timer (\$24.35 as of 2019) is 79 percent higher than a junior part-timer (\$13.63).

Christensen said the Authority also can't say how much money it will save by eliminating the job title because there are too many unknown variables, such as how many motorists who don't have the E-ZPass now will get one, and how many will opt to be billed by mail.

E-ZPass holders pay less.

"We're not looking to go into this to save money, this is about investing in mobility," Christensen said. "And if it costs us money to do that, we're ready to do that."

## STARTING A NEW CHAPTER

The Thruway Authority is offering job counseling, training and resources to toll collectors to help them prepare for other jobs at the Authority, elsewhere in state government or in the private sector. It also said more than half the full-time toll collectors working as of last month would be eligible for retirement at the end of the year.

The toll collectors are represented by Teamsters Local 72, which negotiated an incentive schedule for those who stayed on the job through 2018 and 2019, plus an additional incentive of up to \$20,000 for those who remain on the job through the very last day, and who don't move afterward into other Thruway Authority jobs.

Local 72 President Michael Jovanovic, who took office Jan. 1, said he did not negotiate the incentives but thought they should have been higher.

"I don't believe that the toll takers who were losing their jobs were being dealt with as fairly as possible, that's for sure," he said. "More money should be offered."

Toll collectors have a physically and emotionally demanding job, breathing fumes and interacting with irate motorists at all hours in all weather, said Jovanovic, a bridge maintenance worker who supervises a crew in the Buffalo area. But collecting tolls exerts a very different physical demand than road repairs, and not everyone can make the lateral jump from toll booth to Thruway road crew.

“There’s not much we can do about it,” Jovanovic said. “Any way you slice it as far as the union is concerned, we lost a lot of members.”

#### LARGE-SCALE EFFORT

A consortium of contractors with a very fitting name — Cashless Tolling Constructors LLC — was awarded the \$355.3 million contract last June and will have more than 800 people working across the Thruway’s four maintenance divisions during peak periods this year.

In the Capital Region, installation of the various overhead gantries and their electronics will be completed in stages from this month through July. Installation across the rest of the state is scheduled through September.

Christensen said there have been no surprises or problems so far. The Authority has its own experience with cashless systems through limited rollout starting with the Mario Cuomo Bridge, which opened in 2017, and it studied cashless systems elsewhere.

The biggest learning curve is not for the Thruway Authority but for drivers who don’t have E-ZPASS, he said, and they’ll be the target of an educational campaign.

If nothing else, Christensen urged those who opt to be billed by mail to make sure their mailing address is correct with the state Department of Motor Vehicles, as required by law. Drivers are subject to penalties and can be turned over to collection agencies for unpaid tolls, even if the bill got lost in the mail.

For the Authority itself, the mechanics of the process will be familiar.

“Taking pictures and reading E-ZPass tags — we’ve been doing that for years,” Christensen said.

#### TOLL TRIVIA

Some statistics about Thruway tolls and traffic volume:

In 2018, 206,528,855 vehicle trips were made with the E-ZPass, 267,850,261 with tickets and cash.

Traffic volume varies greatly by season; it hit a 2019 low in February, when 10,707,083 vehicles entered the Thruway at Exits 15 through 61 and peaked at 15,796,363 in August.

From Exit 15 through Exit 61, Albany (Exit 24) is the busiest toll plaza, with a 2019 monthly peak of 1,289,602 vehicles in August.

Little Falls (Exit 29A) and Westfield are the quietest exits in the entire system, trading last place and second-to-last place depending on the season; Westfield (Exit 60) gets a big boost in summer.

Schenectady East (Exit 25) is the second-busiest toll plaza in the Capital Region, with 648,552 vehicles entering in August 2019.

The three Capital Region exits with newly installed toll-reader gantries are all lower-volume toll plazas, with August 2019 volume of 144,228 vehicles at Exit 26, 79,680 at Exit 22 and 117,003 at Exit 21B.