

Will higher tolls across Florida drive away motorists?

By Dan Tracy, Orlando Sentinel

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Lois Broyles intends to [drive](#) almost solely on so-called free roads now that tolls have gone up all across Metro **Orlando** and the state.

"I avoid the Orlando area because we [she and her husband] have an aversion to stopping every few miles to pay the ... toll," said Broyles, who lives in the **Wedgfield** subdivision in east Orange County.

The latest toll increase took effect Sunday, with [cash](#) customers paying 25 cents more and transponder users an additional 9 percent at plazas and most ramps on the 105 mile system operated by the Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority.

Tolls went up a quarter for both cash and transponders a week earlier on 460 miles of roads run throughout Florida by the state. The increases were doubly difficult for Wedgfield residents because they often use the BeachLine Expressway, which is jointly owned by the state and Orlando expressway authority. With both agencies hiking tolls, the result was as much as a 33 percent overall increase on the road linking Orlando with Cocoa Beach.

"We take our [business](#) to **Brevard County**," said Broyles, a retired technical specialist from Brevard Community College who does not have to drive toll roads to go east.

The question for the toll agencies is how many people will follow the lead of Broyles.

The last time tolls were raised on expressway roads in 2009, the agency predicted a 10 percent drop in transactions. There was an initial drop of about 6 percent, but many came back, bringing the overall decrease during the first full year to just 2 percent.

Revenues, however, jumped by 23 percent because of the higher tolls.

Since then, the amount of cars on authority roads has grown little, and toll revenues have failed to meet projections. Authority officials have blamed the slow economy and high gas [prices](#). But now comes a second toll increase in three years. The one in 2009 was the first in 19 years. This hike could cut traffic by 2.3 percent, though toll collections should go up \$18.7 million the first year, the agency estimates.

The state anticipates about a 5 percent drop in usage, but a jump of \$90 million in extra revenue the first year, a spokeswoman said.

Farther down the road, the agencies contend traffic should come back to pre-hike levels, bringing in even more money.

Both the state and the expressway authority say the extra income is needed to build more roads and improve existing ones.

In Orlando, that means joining with the state to build the \$1.66 billion Wekiva Parkway, a 26-mile toll road that would cut through Seminole, Lake and Orange counties. Set to be finished in 2021, it would complete the beltway around Metro Orlando.

The agency also is being asked to help pay for an improved interchange between **State Road 408** and **Interstate 4** in downtown. The state is seeking more than \$250 million as it struggles to

come up with \$2 billion for a major redo of I-4, from Kirkman Road in Orange to **Longwood in Seminole County**.

Authority Chairman Walter Ketcham said he is not sure the agency, even with the toll increase, can afford to give the state as much as it wants.

"You don't want to spend money you don't have," said Ketcham, who added he would push the agency to forgo another planned toll increase in five years because increases are so unpopular with motorists.

Ketcham also is worried by an authority-commissioned report that contends traffic on agency roads and the resulting tolls could be muted in coming years by the continued high price of gas and an economy slow in generating jobs.

Central Florida drivers need to realize that toll roads are a good deal because they get most motorists to their intended destinations much quicker than on often-crowded roads maintained by gas and local taxes, Ketcham said.

"They spend two or three days on [State Road] 50, and they say, 'I can't do this. I can't take an extra hour to get to work,'" he said.

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