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Many drivers say no to higher tolls Chicago-area commuters take alternative routes, even if it costs them time

By Richard Wronski, Chicago Tribune reporter
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Newton Johnson used to take the Tri-State Tollway every day to work. Not anymore.

Ever since the tolls nearly doubled Jan. 1, Johnson has started taking other routes as often as he can, even though they usually add 20 to 25 minutes each way to his commute.

The benefit? Johnson figures avoiding the Tri-State (Interstate 294) can save him about \$50 a month, or as much as \$600 a year in tolls.

In this era of the spontaneous protest, more people like Johnson are taking a personal stand against what they consider an exorbitant increase in tolls — 87.5 percent — by the Illinois Tollway. From Zion to Joliet, from Aurora to Chicago, many drivers say they are seeking alternatives to toll roads whenever they can.

"I don't know any company raising their rates 87 percent and getting away with that," Johnson said. "As far as working people are concerned, we don't get that type of increase. I can see gradually increasing prices. ... If they wanted 40 percent, I don't think anyone would have a problem with that."

In a recent test, the Tribune found regular tollway users could save \$13 to \$38.50 a week by using secondary routes like Skokie Highway (U.S. Highway 41) and Butterfield Road (Illinois Highway 56). In exchange, however, their travel times would easily double.

That's all right with Johnson, who commutes between Maywood and Deerfield via River Road, Milwaukee Avenue and Lake-Cook Road on most days, barring bad weather.

"Is it easier to take the toll road? Yes, it is. Would I burn less gas? Yes, I would," said Johnson, 59. "So I'll take (the tollway) when I need to. During the winter, there's no alternative."

Time will tell whether people like Johnson keep their New Year's resolutions to avoid toll roads.

Tollway officials readily concede they expect to lose some customers because of the increase. The agency anticipates a 5.9 percent drop in passenger car traffic this year.

Already, car traffic was down 4.5 percent in the first week of the month, compared with the same period last year, the tollway said. Truck tolls did not change this year.

Tollway Executive Director Kristi Lafleur said the agency expects customers will "intuitively experiment with new travel routes," but they will eventually return.

Transportation experts aren't so sure.

"Simple economics suggests that many people will avoid the tollway on short-distance trips when attractive options are available — and many people indeed have such options," said Joseph Schwieterman, a professor of urban transportation economics at DePaul University.

"The biggest declines in traffic are likely yet to come. Some motorists will stumble upon new alternatives. Others remain only vaguely aware of the higher tolls they are now paying."

The tollway calculates the cost of the average trip will rise to \$1.18, from 63 cents, and argues that this is lower than rates charged by most toll authorities nationwide. For a Chicago-area commuter traveling twice a day, five days a week, 50 weeks a year, that's an extra \$275 annually, bringing the yearly tollway tab to \$590.

But many commuters pay much more. True to his profession, certified public accountant Phillip Staden keeps a close eye on his family's finances.

Staden, 55, of Winfield, said his goal is to stay off the toll roads as much as possible and save himself at least \$3 a day. That could

amount to as much as \$750 a year.

He has started taking North Avenue and Illinois Highway 83 to his office in Darien and to visit clients, instead of the Veterans Memorial Tollway (I-355), as often as he can.

"Taking (arterials) is longer, but if it's nice weather, I'll do it," said Staden. "If it's crappy weather, then the tollway is better. But the goal now for my family budget is to reduce those tolls. ...

"With all that extra money, I could have a nice lunch every day instead of giving it to the tollway. Or I could buy one of my kids a (computer). Even if I don't put it in my savings account, it's better than giving it to the government."

The Illinois State Toll Highway Authority board, which approved the near doubling of tolls in August, stressed the increase was needed both to maintain the 286-mile system and to finance a hefty \$12.1 billion expansion and improvement plan over the next 15 years.

The tollway's capital program, Lafleur said, will keep the system in good repair and add capacity that will ultimately save customers time and money.

Lafleur points to studies showing Chicago with some of the worst congestion in the nation, costing the area an estimated \$8.2 billion a year.

"People are tired of sitting in traffic," she said. "We understand that no one wants to pay more in commuting costs. But, there is also a cost to doing nothing."

Peter Skosey, a transportation expert at the nonprofit Metropolitan Planning Council, agrees.

The "bottom line is that transportation infrastructure costs" money, Skosey said. "Either drivers pay to keep it up, or other sources of government pay through general taxes or we all pay in decreased performance and congestion."

Not everyone has the option of dumping the tollway, however, nor do all drivers want to. For some, the choice of routes may depend primarily on driving the shortest distance and saving money on gas.

Salesman Robert Rodriguez, 47, who spends \$5 to \$6 a day in tolls, said he can't afford extra travel time.

"When you're in sales, speed is of the essence," said Rodriguez, who on a recent morning was meeting clients at a restaurant off the Randall Road exit of the Jane Addams Memorial Tollway (I-90) in Elgin.

Kenosha resident Todd Price, who often takes the Tri-State to Chicago, doesn't mind the higher tolls.

"The roads have to be safe and we have to pay for the roads," Price said. "The I-PASS brings the cost down, and that's a factor too."

William Baltutis, executive director of the Transportation Management Association of Lake-Cook, a nonprofit group that works to improve commuting, calls the situation "a trade-off of time and money."

"My own view is that although some commuters are upset about the toll increases, they still commute on the tollway because the tollway offers significant time savings over commuting on arterial roads," Baltutis said.

Like it or not, the Illinois Tollway plays a vital role in northeastern Illinois' commercial and economic development, and in getting people to their jobs, said Randy Blankenhorn, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

"We may be seeing a diversion from the tollway," Blankenhorn said. "But many arterials are congested. People are going to have to make that choice: Is it worth paying more (to use the tollway)? That's a decision people make on every trip."

The Illinois Department of Transportation has no indication yet of any increase in traffic on arterial routes since Jan. 1, a spokesman said last week.

But motorists like Bella Decasa said the tollway can count her and her husband out. Both have decided to avoid the Reagan Memorial Tollway (I-88) in favor of nearby, and nearly parallel, Butterfield Road.

Even though Butterfield is undergoing a major widening project, dealing with the construction is preferable to paying the toll increase, Decasa said.

"I'm grumbling to myself every time I have to drive in the morning because of all the traffic on the local roads," said Decasa, 60, of North Aurora. "But I'd rather do that than paying a lot of money."

"A little (toll) increase, I don't mind. But when you (nearly) double it, that's terrible."

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