

EDITORIALS DECEMBER 11, 2016 10:08 PM

Toll-taking MDX is hated, but is that totally fair?



MIAMI HERALD EDITORIAL BOARD

Highway robbery. That's what many Miami-Dade motorists probably blurted out after learning that the toll-filled coffers of the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, the county's unpopular tolling agency, runneth over.

And, commuters are sure, the millions come from us being nickel-and-dimed as we drive along the Dolphin Expressway, the Don Shula Expressway, Gratigny Parkway, the Airport Expressway and the Snapper Creek Expressway — all MDX toll roads. Just try to avoid one to get anywhere. Difficult, and time-consuming, to do.

Likely to add to MDX's unpopularity is its recent financial report deciphered by Miami Herald reporter Douglas Hanks. It shows MDX generated \$235 million in toll revenues in the past 12 months, and that between 2014 and 2016, toll revenue surged by about \$105 million, an 82 percent increase after MDX expanded tolling to all of its exits on the Dolphin and Airport expressways. That "closing of the system" sparked a backlash among motorists and local politicians, who have been known to openly denounce the agency.

The relationship between the agency and motorists has never been the same. Not even the effort to give motorists \$5.5 million in refunds through the MDX Cash Back Toll Dividend Program has warmed feelings.

MDX motorists paid an average of \$628,000 in tolls per day in 2016. Yikes.

But to call it highway robbery would be an unfair description of the productive work the MDX is launching — as it struggles to polish a tarnished public image.

MDX Chair Louis V. Martinez wrote to the Editorial Board that the bulk of the tolls collected are reinvested into the community and fund the construction projects that alleviate traffic congestion, create thousands of local jobs and provide new opportunities to small and local businesses — as the agency vowed when created. It's a promises-kept message that MDX should better broadcast.

It can't be disputed that as we snarl and pay our daily tolls, we also see the massive improvements — the first in decades — being made to the old and worn expressways around us.

Basically, we have a public entity that is spending millions on transportation infrastructure projects. And is not taxing everybody, just expressway users.

Still, it's a tough sell to get commuters to side with MDX, but the Board believes that Miami-Dade's traffic problems will otherwise choke this community. Attention must be paid, now, fast. That's nothing new.

Yet, when we look around for governments or agencies that are actually spending money to make our roadways more navigable, we can mainly see MDX's projects and improvements. And yes, they cost a lot of money.

But it remains that the agency has a serious public-relations problem. Some elected officials say that MDX is in a silo, detached in an ivory tower.

Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez has said that MDX should lower its tolls rather than require users to spend \$100 annually to be eligible to enroll in a rebate program. Good point.

And he thinks that, a mayor, instead of a private citizen, should serve as chair of the MDX board. But the introduction of a political representative, no matter how level-headed — demands thorough discussion, all the way up to the state level.

It falls on MDX to fix this "evil agency" perception. If it's truly concerned about transparency —and it should be — its board should welcome an audit by the county. That would come with a reveal about the salaries of top MDX executives. It would be a good first step to assuring skeptical motorists that their nickels and dimes are making the trip smoother. MDX must somehow win motorists over.



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