



Workers install a high-speed E-ZPass lane at the Dover toll plaza. The project will include a new toll plaza, a new toll booth and a new toll plaza. The project will include a new toll plaza, a new toll booth and a new toll plaza.

High-speed E-ZPass lanes to open Thursday in Dover

Drivers will go through at 65 mph, reducing bottleneck

By PATRICK JACKSON
Dover Bureau reporter

The trip to the beach on Del. 1 will get just a bit easier Thursday when Delaware waves traffic through new high-speed E-ZPass lanes at the Dover toll plaza for the first time.

E-ZPass motorists heading to and from the beaches, or commuters passing through the plaza each day now will be able to cruise along at 65 mph, with toll electronically deducted, just as they do at the Bodkins Corner plaza in New Castle County.

The state pledged to have the highway speed lanes open for the Memorial Day weekend when the \$7.7 million Dover toll plaza project began last summer. The job will be ready on time, despite rainy weather that has delayed other projects in the state.

Dale Derricksen, of Sverris, said the improvements will remove one of the traffic headaches on a trip to Rehoboth Beach.

"I'd definitely use it," said Derricksen, who has an E-ZPass electronic transponder on his minivan. "It's going to relieve a bottleneck and help traffic move a lot faster."

Before the conversion, the Dover plaza had 12 toll booths, all equipped to process electronic signals that deduct tolls from a user's E-ZPass account. But drivers had to slow to less

than 10 mph. At rush hour and on weekends, E-ZPass users often also had to wait in line.

The updated plan will maintain six traditional tollbooths, which will accept E-ZPass or cash. But four lanes — two in each direction — will be separated by a divider and allow tolls to be electronically deducted from vehicles moving at highway speed.

"This is long overdue," Transportation Secretary Nathan Hayward III said. "It's going to be a big improvement, and not just on race weekends. Any beach weekend, starting on Friday and ending on Monday, you can see the backup here. This is going to go a long way toward alleviating that."

Hayward said the installation of the high-speed lanes will not lead to the elimination of any full-time toll-collector jobs, although part-time and seasonal jobs may be cut over time through attrition. The state also will be able to reduce overtime expenses.

Officials also expect the new lanes to boost the number of people in Delaware joining the E-ZPass system. DeIDOT officials said E-ZPass usage at the Dover plaza increased from 39 percent of vehicles to 45 percent from 2002 to 2003.

The convenience of the new lanes coupled with E-ZPass discounts of 15 percent to 50 percent off normal tolls will en-

courage more drivers to set up accounts. Motorists pay into the accounts and money is subtracted when a windshield transponder signal is read by an E-ZPass scanner in Delaware, along I-96 from Maryland to Massachusetts and on most local and Northeast river crossings.

"We think all it will take is someone sitting in the cash lane looking over and seeing cars going through the express lanes," said DeIDOT spokesman Mike Williams. "We think that should be enough to get people to say 'Even though I may only use this road once a month, it is worth it.'"

Hayward expects the same thing to happen once high-speed lanes are installed on I-96 in Newark. Hayward said he hopes to be able to start work to add high-speed lanes there by the summer of 2005. That will cost \$40 million to \$50 million.

"We're already seeing close to 50 percent use rates in Delaware," he said. "When we get that fixed, we think it will even go up more."

Delaware has more than 70,000 E-ZPass accounts with more than 138,000 transponders, a number officials said they expect to keep growing in spite of changes planned for the system.

DeIDOT announced last week that, starting July 1, it will charge a one-time \$25 fee for each transponder when new customers sign up for E-ZPass, or for existing customers adding a transponder. The devices had been provided at no charge.

Delaware is one of 10 East

Coast states on the E-ZPass system. Agencies such as the Delaware River and Bay Authority and the Delaware River Port Authority also use the system at their facilities.

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TOLLBOOTH IN DOVER

34,525 Motorists passing through toll on average weekend.

2,000 Cars DeDOT estimates can use new high-speed lanes in an hour.

350 Cars handled by manual booths in an hour.

45 Percentage of vehicles using E-ZPass at Dover toll plaza.