



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

## More Miami drivers applied for toll rebates this year. Many of them got nothing.

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Motorists on Miami-Dade's expressways paid more than \$235 million in tolls this year, and a tiny portion of that is going back to drivers in rebate checks this week.

The \$5.6 million being paid to about 80,000 toll payers this week by the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority represents a new peak in the agency's three-year-old loyalty program, introduced in 2015 amid a backlash over more aggressive tolling. And while registration for the Frequent Driver Rewards Program is also at a record high, a majority of participants end up getting nothing from the agency best known as the MDX., which runs the Dolphin and four other toll roads.

Some motorists don't pay enough tolls to qualify for the rebate. The rules require drivers to use SunPass transponders to pay at least \$100 in MDX tolls over the 12 months that ended June 30. Others wrongly think the MDX oversees tolls everywhere and can provide rebates on state-run roads like the Florida Turnpike or municipal bridges like the Rickenbacker and the Broad causeways.

MDX director Javier Rodriguez told a recent board meeting that nearly a third of the people who signed up for the agency's frequent-driver program did not spend anything all year on a single MDX expressway.

"These customers are spending toll dollars," Rodriguez told board members in October. "They're on the Turnpike, they're on I-95, some are on the Broad Causeway and the Rickenbacker. But not in the MDX system."

Rebate checks were smaller this year, thanks to the growing popularity of the program. The MDX board each year decides on how much money it can refund to participants in the frequent-driver program, based on year-end revenues and expenses.

For 2017, the board agreed to rebate \$5.9 million to eligible participants, up from \$5.5 million in 2016. But with more drivers eligible, the individual shares of the rebate pie shrunk. Last year, eligible drivers received 30 percent of their tolls back in rebate checks. The program's debut year in 2015 also paid out rebates of 30 percent.

But for 2017, the rebate payout shrunk to 22 percent as more people signed up for the giveback program.

"This year we had a very large increase of customers registering and qualifying," said Tere Garcia, an MDX spokesperson. "So [in] 2017 we distributed more money to more customers."

The MDX answers to a board of elected officials and private-sector executives appointed by the state and Miami-Dade. It sets tolls and oversees maintenance on the Dolphin and four other expressways: State Road 112/Airport, State Road 874/Don Shula, State Road 878/Snapper Creek and State Road 924/Gratigny.

In the fall of 2014, MDX expanded tolls to all exits along the Dolphin and Airport expressways. The move helped toll revenue for the entire system soar about 80 percent in two years, from \$129 million in 2014 to \$235 million in 2016.

No tax dollars go into the MDX highways, and tolling users has allowed the system to perform regular maintenance at a time when Miami-Dade County is facing heat for allowing its Metrorail system to fall into disrepair for lack of maintenance over the years. The county recently introduced its first new train to the system since the 1980s.

MDX faced criticism for launching a rebate program instead of just using the money to lower tolls, even though the amount rebated is so small it would amount to pennies being shaved off the rates. The agency designed the rebate program to reward the most frequent drivers on the system.

Last year, roughly 113,000 Sunpass responders were registered for the frequent-driver program. This year, registration spiked 62 percent to 183,000.

Less than half of the participants qualified for rebates either year. In 2016, about 54,000 SunPass transponders qualified, amounting to roughly 48 percent of the total. This year, about 80,000 transponders qualified. That was roughly 44 percent of the total enrolled.

To boost enrollment for 2018, MDX this year added a month of registration for the frequent-driver program. Registration began Dec. 1, the first time MDX allowed new participants to sign up the same week that existing participants received their rebate checks. Registration runs through March 31, and can be completed on the MDX website. Existing participants aren't dropped from the program, but MDX encourages enrollees to visit the site, log in to their accounts and verify that their information is current.