

There's very little easy about E-ZPass

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ROAD WARRIOR COLUMNIST



Short of the hatred generated by Big Oil, nothing rivals the anger some road warriors feel for Big E-Z, the electronic monolith that quietly takes our money on tri-state toll roads and bridges.

Reader bile is so corrosive that I hesitate to write about E-ZPass, for fear of unleashing an e-mail avalanche that's sure to jam The Record's electronic server through Labor Day.

Take Ridgefield's Ellen LaFurn, who hated paying \$1 a month for a service she seldom used anymore. To break free, Ellen sent her tag to Big E-Z's Staten Island office by certified mail, and thought of it no more.

But Big E-Z thought of Ellen — every month. "I kept getting billed for monthly charges for over two years," she said.

She made call after call. When she finally reached "a normal person" — a living, breathing human who actually responds to simple questions — she was told to put her complaint in writing. It still took months of letters and calls before New York's Big E-Z returned her fees.

Still, this ordeal took its toll.

"I kept all my documentation," she said, "just in case."

Nobody, it seems, likes the \$1 monthly fee, especially Bob Green of Ho-Ho-Kus, a New York subscriber. For a while, Bob thought he was beating the system because New Jersey subscribers were hit with the monthly charges. But Bob's "discount" was short-lived.

"In its never-ending appetite for funds to feed its bureaucracy, the Port Authority adopted the same \$12-a-year fee," he railed.

Poor Bob never saw it coming.

Rich Forzani also learned a hard lesson last March when he reported his transponder stolen to New Jersey Big E-Z.

"I found it 45 minutes later," said the Glen Rock reader.

But this discovery came too late. The old tag couldn't be reactivated. It would take seven to 10 days to get a new one.

"Why?" Rich cried. "In this electronic age, I don't understand how it's possible to deactivate a unit so quickly, yet not be able to reactivate it."

This is a small disappointment compared to the loss suffered by my colleague, Joseph Ax. At the Henry Hudson Bridge last week, a tollgate refused to let Joe pass and a cop confiscated his tag.

Yes, confiscated!

The officer didn't know much. But after a few calls, New York E-ZPass came clean. A glitch in Joe's credit card account had prevented payment on his previous three toll transactions. By the fourth toll, Big E-Z lost patience and claimed the tag.

The penalty: Toll payments in full plus a \$25 administrative fee for each missed toll — well over \$100. Big E-Z was willing to cut Joe one small break, however.

"They'll let me slide for one of the administrative fees, but not all of them," he said.

Lately, a huge Big E-Z disappointment is Greenpass, a special tag that offers discounts to ener-

gy-efficient cars. Prius owners, for example, pay \$4 instead of \$8 at off-peak hours on Hudson crossings. The New York Thruway discount is 15 percent.

Hybrid owner Mel Freedenberg of Ridgewood quickly applied. But only the Toyota Prius and two Hondas — the Insight and the Civic Hybrid — qualify for the break.

Unfortunately for him, Mel owns a Toyota Camry Hybrid.

Mel's loss is Anju Jessani's gain. Anju owns a Prius, so he called New Jersey E-ZPass to ask about the discount. "You don't know what you're talking about," a woman told him.

A second call brought this less-than-helpful response: Greenpass isn't yet available to New Jersey E-ZPass customers.

But Anju is from Hoboken, where surrender is anathema. He applied for New York E-ZPass, and now enjoys the discount.

Yes, New York. That's the home of the Big E-Z offices that Ellen LaFurn warned us about. Sara Streatfeild, too, knows New York Big E-Z intimately.

A Prius owner, Sara has used a Greenpass transponder since March to visit her mom in Long Island. Each time the Upper Saddle River woman crosses the Hudson in non-peak hours, she should pay \$4 instead of \$8.

But bills from the Spring Valley, N.Y., office say \$6, the same off-peak fee that all subscribers pay, so Sara calls each month.

"I'm told my Greenpass is now linked to my regular New York account and everything's fine," she said. "But it isn't. I even went there personally. Each time, I talk to somebody new."

Like Ellen, Sara now keeps records with names.

This column has been writing about Big E-Z since its inception. Like the Internet, the cellphone and cable TV, it's a wonderful service — when it works. When it doesn't, it can transform quiet saints into raving horn-blowers.

Getting your way with Big E-Z isn't easy. Don't expect much. But here are some suggestions:

Sure, take names AND phone numbers. Be persistent. Pay your bill on time. If all else fails, give up New York or New Jersey E-ZPass and try Delaware's Big E-Z. The system there is one of the few with a main phone line answered by live humans.

Even Pennsylvania E-Z Pass doesn't offer that service.

After a \$25 charge, a Delaware tag works here, but there's no \$1 monthly fee.

Call 1-888-397-2773.

Road Warrior passes through here on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. E-mail: cichowski@northjersey.com

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