Ohio Turnpike has toll payment machines taking proximity cards

The Ohio Turnpike is the first US tollroad to accept payment by the new RFID proximity cards - sometimes called "tap-and-go" cards. The proximity card readers were added to six PayWerks automatic toll payment machines that already accepted conventional magstripe cards at the suggestion of MasterCard which is trialing its PayPass proximity cards in northern Ohio.

Proximity or contactless cards contain a small RFID chip and antenna embedded in the plastic like a much downpowered and slow version of a electronic tolling sticker tag. The prox cards are down-powered so that the customer has to deliberately tap or come within a few centimeters (an inch or at most two inches) of the reader. The user is recommended to tap or touch the reader with the card in order to get it within range.

The proximity cards are being accepted at Exit 140 Amherst-Oberlin and at Exit 161 Strongsville-Cleveland, among others. Vending machines are getting them at the Vermillion Valley and Middle Ridge service plazas in what is billed a 90 day trial by MasterCard.

Bill Foster president of PayWerks of Newport Beach CA, suppliers of the toll payment machines to Ohio and TCA says they are working well. He says the average transaction
time for the prox card is about 5 seconds compared to 8 to 10 seconds for magstripe card transactions.

"We're offering a supplementary payment mechanism," says Foster - supplementary to transponder toll payment. He notes that some of the toll agencies which have pushed transponders most effectively still have 25% patrons without a transponder. Coin machines are increasingly useless in the US since the largest circulating coin, the quarter, is now such a small proportion of most tolls.

The PayWerks all-payments (coins, bills, magstripe card, proximity card) machines with three sets of acceptors at arm level of a sports car, SUV and truck tractor cab cost $70k to $90k each depending on volume. PayWerks also has a card payment machine that omits the cash option, a cards only machine for $40k to $50k/unit.

The all-payments machines are designed to eliminate the need for a toll collector. A toll lane manned 24/7 costs about $300k/yr at union pay rates of $25/hr + benefits and nearly $200k at market pay rates and outsourced collectors.

The alternative for tolling vehicles without transponders is video tolling, in which the photographed license plate number is used via motor registry databases to generate a mailed toll bill.

PayWerks not TrafficWerks

We recently used the company's old name TrafficWerks. Foster says that company was dissolved because its efforts to get business with traffic data didn't go anywhere. But, he says, the automatic toll payment machines that TrafficWerks developed are doing well, and the new company name reflects the new focus. (Despite the Germanic suffix 'werks' in both names, neither company has any German connection.)

see www.paywerksinc.com

MasterCard misinformed

A statement by MasterCard says the Ohio Turnpike "is the first tollroad in the US to accept payment cards for self-service toll transactions." False. The Dulles Greenway in northern Virginia has been accepting cards at all its ramp toll plazas since the tollroad opened in the fall of 1995. Also the Pennsylvania Turnpike Extensions use TransCore Australia equipment that accepts magstripe cards. A couple of St Lawrence River border crossing toll plazas US-Canada and US-Mexico (Eagle Pass) accept cards in equipment provided by TRMI. There are probably others.

In France payment by self-swiped magstripe card is the single most common payment mode on tollroads, ahead of both cash and transponders.

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