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**DAILY NEWS** |

## **E-ZPass freebies cost MTA \$14M a year**

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As straphangers face the possibility of higher fares and tolls, the MTA's freebie E-ZPasses are costing the authority \$14 million in lost revenues a year.

In March alone, cars and other vehicles with a free E-ZPass made nearly 300,000 trips via Metropolitan Transportation Authority bridges and tunnels - amounting to approximately \$1.2 million in uncollected tolls, MTA records show. Many of the trips were made by city employees, including on-duty police officers and firefighters.

The MTA is planning fare and toll hikes in 2010, but they could be put on the table for next year because of budget gaps. Given the MTA's shortfall, fare hikes could come around next year - and Gene Russianoff of the Straphangers Campaign said the city should pony up some dough.

"The City of New York should reimburse the agency's cost, as it now does in part for discounted fares for city students and senior citizens," Russianoff said.

Toll revenues go toward maintenance and operating costs associated with MTA bridges and tunnels. They also help fund the bus, subway and commuter train network. Of the approximately 24,000 freebie tags issued or honored by the MTA, nearly 14,500 were distributed to city agencies.

The largest batches went to the police and fire departments. Smaller numbers went to sanitation, recreation and other city departments, records show.

The city Office of Emergency Management has 107 of the nonrevenue tags. The mayor's office has 14 but is only using 10, spokesman Jason Post said. Those 10 are assigned to city cars for official business by senior staff, including deputy mayors, Post said.

For decades, the MTA has granted free passage to government agencies that "provide services directly to us ... to save public money by avoiding the need for these agencies to budget public funds for tolls," the MTA's bridge and tunnel division said.

The MTA also has doled out more than 2,700 special free-travel passes good only on the Triborough Bridge approach to Randalls and Wards islands.

These limited freebies, given to city and state workers assigned to the islands, include 543 passes given to the city Parks and Recreation Department, 559 to the Fire Academy and 493 to the Department of Environmental Protection. Two state mental health facilities have 859 tags.

City Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe said those assigned to the East River outposts have few options. "There is no subway line," he said. "Bus service is infrequent. They are almost forced to drive."

The department provides a shuttle bus over the bridge to a Manhattan subway line on a very limited basis, Benepe said.

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