

LIFE OF A TOLL COLLECTOR Coins ... complaints

By Rob Varley / Staff Writer

WEEDSPORT - Thruway toll collectors: Empire State ambassadors?

Officials from the New York State Thruway Authority and Teamsters Local 72 think so.

Because of his unshakable faith in his staff, Teamsters Local 72 President Martin Latko was incensed when the Web site www.smokinggun.com -which posts police reports and legal documents - ran customers complaint forms filed with state officials about New York's toll collectors.

The complaints ranged from toll collectors being rude, threatening, and swearing, to more bizarre behavior. One collector was accused of short-changing a driver while engrossed in his bongo drums.

In another incident, a woman paid the toll collector for herself and her daughter following in the next car. The daughter, unaware of her mother's actions, paid the collector, who called her "sucker" as she drove away.

"For us to respond to that, just gives more fuel to the fire," Latko said. He called it a "crock of bologna."

Statistics from the Thruway Authority are a testament to the toll collector's patience and friendliness.

In 2002, of the 415 million transactions, more than 120 million were cash transactions involving toll collectors.

"We might have a hundred complaints, give or take a few, a year. When you compare that to the transactions, it's rather insignificant," Thruway Authority Deputy Director of Operations Bill Rinaldi said. "We also receive a number of correspondence from customers complimenting our toll collectors."

Toll collectors are often the first contact visitors have in New York. They dispense information and help with directions. Sometimes, they encounter frantic motorists and have to relay emergency information to the state police.

Moreover, they do this in the bitter cold and dead of night. Like many stations at low traffic periods, Exit 40 in Weedsport is often staffed by one employee, who works both incoming and outgoing lanes.

"It's a challenging job to deal with customers day-after-day. They do a good job," said Rinaldi.

He said the toll collector jobs are very competitive. There are currently 500 full-time employees, who make \$11.78 an hour to start. After five years, it jumps to \$17.06. Approximately 1,000 part-time employees supplement the staff at peak traffic periods, including major holidays.

After being ranked by civil service exam scores, candidates must go through a screening process and background check.

"Mostly, we're looking for the skills in working with money," he said.

Successful candidates are trained and retrained in policy and safety issues as well as customer service.

"(We) stress the importance of service, helping with directions or helping in an emergency situation," he said.

Latko compared it to other customer service positions: Occasional abuse from customers happens. When a driver has a bad day, the collectors know it. They even encounter people who don't want to pay the toll.

"If someone is (upset) because of traffic or whatever the case may be, they hear the brunt," Latko said.

Rinaldi agrees.

"As part of the customer service training, we give our toll collectors pointers on dealing with 'difficult' people," he said. "It could vary. Everyone is entitled to a bad day ... maybe something about their trip didn't go just as they expected."

Latko says toll collectors are often mistreated.

"They've had money spat on, been cursed at, and they're supposed to just sit there and report it. Nothing is done to the customer."

Latko said the Thruway Authority is so focused on the customer that false claims from drivers often cause problems for his union members.

Rinaldi disagreed, explaining they had an excellent relationship with the union and all complaints are dealt with fairly.

Health is also a concern for the toll collectors. They're supplied with disposable latex gloves and trained how to treat a ticket or money that has some foreign substance on it.

"We also equip the toll booths with blood borne pathogen precaution kits that contains items that toll collectors use to protect themselves and to accept the ticket and the money and put it in a safe place," Rinaldi said.

Pennies, the smallest denomination, actually appear to cause some of the greatest frustration.

"We do accept pennies as part of the toll. We do not hand out pennies as part of the change," Rinaldi said.

The toll collectors' union has asked that pennies not be accepted. Counting pennies often takes up valuable time. How often do people attempt to pay the whole transaction in pennies?

"Very seldom, but it has happened on occasion," said Rinaldi. "Our instructions are: You accept the payment and thank them."

With the brutal winter months bearing down, Latko will focus on making work more comfortable for toll collectors. Updated, warmer uniforms and redesigned toll booths with better climate control are in the making.

Even with the growth of the EZ pass automated toll system, Rinaldi can't envision a toll collector-less future.

"They'll always be a need for toll collectors."