

**Boston Herald - Fast Lane Buck Passed
Audit: Company Violated Contract
By Hillary Chabot - 8/11/2009**

Tens of thousands of Turnpike motorists have been socked with falsely inflated Fast Lane bills because the company that provided their transponders violated its multimillion-dollar contract by failing to inspect the system, a state audit has found.

State Auditor Joseph DeNucci - who investigated the overcharges after a front-page Herald expose in February - found that Fast Lane provider TransCore failed to inspect transponder equipment over the past two years as mandated in its \$11 million-a-year contract.

“The Massachusetts Turnpike Authority neither requested nor had TransCore completed Annual Certification Tests mandated by state contract for 2007 or 2008. We feel that the performance of these might have alerted personnel that (equipment), such as sensors, were failing to perform to specifications,” DeNucci wrote.

His office found that defective equipment caused some 113,940 Fast Lane overcharges last year, for a total of \$190,441.

Pike Executive Director Jeff Mullan defended TransCore and Fast Lane, pointing out that the overcharges are a tiny percentage of the 119 million transactions on the Pike every year.

“While even one overcharge is too many, the audit reported that fewer than one-tenth of one percent of all transactions resulted in overcharges,” Mullan said.

Mullan also vowed to refund all drivers who were overbilled, and said TransCore will begin conducting quarterly reviews to prevent the overcharges.

There were roughly 1.4 million discrepancies a year, according to the audit. Many of them stemmed from Fast Lane users placing a transponder registered to a car on a larger vehicle.

DeNucci also discovered that the ailing Turnpike Authority has failed to remedy one of the critical issues that led to the overcharges - Fast Lane scanners that are unable to distinguish between two vehicles that are close together in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

“This (failed) separation of vehicles has yet to be rectified and is particularly problematic during congested conditions, when vehicles may be only inches apart,” DeNucci wrote.

The overcharges come after lawmakers passed a 20 percent sales tax hike to pay off sky-high Pike debts.

Eric Tollar, spokesman for the anti-toll group Citizens Against Toll Roads, blasted the agency, saying, “They just keep stacking up evidence of their inability to effectively manage this business.”

Pike board member Mary Connaughton, a part-time Herald blogger, said fixing the system is even more important now that Pike officials are giving transponders away. “With all the efforts going into getting more people to use the Fast Lane system,” she said, “it’s all the more necessary to ensure the integrity of the system.”