

Not so smart

IN AN UNDERSTANDABLE desire to eliminate time-wasting, life-sapping, rage-inducing traffic jams, as well as lines at the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles, it's tempting to go for the quick electronic fix.

Calls for so-called "smart" lanes and "smart" driver's licenses are heard all around the technologically savvy world of Northern Virginia, where you're a dinosaur if you still watch movies on VHS instead of DVD, and where the lure of the latest gadget is often irresistible.

As is the thought of being able to breeze around daily bottlenecks at crowded toll stations on the Dulles Toll Road without having to stop first.

Two dozen states already have adopted such electronic systems, which automatically deduct tolls from motorists' credit cards or prepaid accounts whenever they drive by.

That's if they work as advertised. Sometimes they don't. As the Associated Press reported Sunday, some of these smart ideas are causing a lot of dumb mix-ups.

For example, New Jersey's \$300 million E-ZPass electronic toll system has spewed out a flurry of tickets motorists say are undeserved. Part of the problem is that most of the 35-cent-toll collection system is financed with the \$25 fines collected by nonpayers, a built-in incentive to aggressively find and fine toll cheats.

But when motorists are accused of ducking tolls while recovering at home from open heart surgery, as one 73-year-old New Jersey man complained happened to him, serious questions as to the reliability of the cameras used to photograph cheaters' license plates and trigger the resulting tickets arise.

Many of New Jersey's 1.6 million drivers who use the system's transponders claim they have been fined for dodging tolls on roads they never traveled on, forcing the state to suspend the E-ZPass system for four months so an investigation can be conducted.

Meanwhile, Reps. Jim Moran, D-8th District, and Tom Davis, R-11th District, are introducing legislation in Congress that would require states to issue "smart" driver's licenses that include computer chips with biometric data that supposedly would be impervious to fraud.

The bill is a response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. At least seven of the 19 hijackers obtained fraudulent Virginia driver's licenses after lying about their residency and paying other people to lie for them as well.

If there is any lesson to be learned from the New Jersey debacle, it's that it's dumb to go "smart" unless you proceed with a considerable amount of caution.

The DMV's failure was in not verifying the information the hijackers provided, relying instead on fake affidavits. But what's to prevent future terrorists from similar lying on "smart" card applications? Thieves have already figured out how to hijack the identities of some 800,000 Americans a year.

If not also backed up with a tedious system of verification, reliance on "smart" cards might even lull people into a false sense of security. Even cameras sometimes lie.

A verification system designed to check and cross-check every item of personal information, one that goes far beyond any individual's ability to bypass it, might be a smarter way to go.