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Written by Claire Wiseman, staff writer

Area tax collectors report confusion over \$25 cut in auto tag fees

ST. PETERSBURG — Gov. Rick Scott's much-touted \$25 cut in auto tag fees will kick in on Sept. 1, but the rollback isn't eliciting a chorus of cheers at area tax collectors' offices.

It's mostly sparking confusion.

People with September renewals who want to pay now can't — unless they forgo the discount. The state's system will not allow renewals to be processed at a discount before Sept. 1.

Area tax collectors waited to send out September renewal notices, and they're holding any that are returned until Sept. 2. (Sept. 1 is Labor Day.)

"We're trying everything we can to make sure they get the lower amount," said Sally Daniels, the tax collector for Hernando County.

Those who bring their September renewals to a tax collector's office between now and Sept. 1 can choose to pay the higher fee and have it processed immediately, or wait for the renewal to be processed after that date.

All August renewals will be processed at the higher rate, said Brenna Hagar, a spokeswoman for the Pinellas County tax collector.

But there is one method of getting a discount for an August renewal that tax collectors don't endorse: Drivers could simply let their registration lapse until Sept. 1.

"I know people are doing it to save money," Daniels said.

Late fees, typically \$5 for an average-sized car, aren't processed until the 10th of the month. That means that drivers who wait to renew could still save \$20.

Tax collectors said they remind people that driving an unregistered car is illegal.

"You're putting yourself out there for a ticket if you get stopped," Daniels said.

St. Petersburg police haven't noticed an uptick in expired registrations, or issued special instructions to officers to deal with the quirk in the fee cut. A spokesman said officers will continue checking registrations during traffic stops as usual.

John Sims, 47, didn't know about the fee cut when he arrived at the Pinellas County Tax Collector's Office on 66th Street N on Thursday. His renewal is due Saturday, and he said he wouldn't consider waiting a week to get the savings.

"My luck, I'd be the one pulled over," he said.

When Terry Wolfe, 72, arrived at the same office, he hadn't heard about the rollback either.

His renewal wasn't due until October, he just wanted to get it out of the way early. He decided he would come back after Sept. 1 to get the savings.

Area tax collectors said they worked together to educate the public about the discount, and even mailed out renewal notices later than normal so those mailed back wouldn't be held at their offices quite as long. But they aren't sure the message was received.

"When they come in to pay, they are quite surprised and not aware that this was even a reduction," Pasco County Tax Collector Mike Fasano said.

In an odd twist, Fasano pointed out that for those born Sept. 1, there may be no good way to get the discount this year. Mailed renewals can't be processed until Sept. 1 on the state's system, and since the office will be closed for the holiday, they won't be official until Sept. 2.

That means Sept. 1 birthdays run the risk of a ticket if they wait. Those people will need to come into their tax collectors office before Labor Day if they want to make sure they're covered.

Fasano said he would like to have seen a system that gave a lower rate to those with Sept. 1 birthdays, rather than a system that went into effect on Sept. 1.

Regardless, tax collectors warn that people should expect long lines on Sept. 2.

"Try to avoid coming into our office on the second to get the lower fee," said Dale Hoffman, director of branch operations for the Hillsborough County Tax Collector's Office.

He recommends renewing online instead.

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