

# Tampa Bay Times



WINNER OF 12 PULITZER PRIZES

## **Airbnb nears tax deal with Hillsborough County as college football championship nears**

Steve Contorno, Times Staff Writer

TAMPA — After a year-long impasse, the Hillsborough County Tax Collector's office and Airbnb are nearing an agreement that would require the peer-to-peer rental company to collect taxes on each night booked through its online portal.

A deal could be reached before Tampa hosts the College Football Playoff National Championship on Jan. 9, expected to be one of the busiest tourism weekends in Tampa Bay area history.

The two sides remain split, however, on how much information the county should be able to see about the rental properties posted on Airbnb. Tax Collector Doug Belden said the county must be able to audit the rental inventory on the company's website to verify that the money turned over from Airbnb is accurate, but Airbnb doesn't want to disclose private information about its users.

If no agreement is reached before next month's game, it means Hillsborough County could miss out on a lot of tax revenue from visitors using Airbnb to find alternatives to hotels that weekend.

Belden said he would like a deal by then, but he won't back down from his demands.

"I need to be able to audit them," he said. "I don't just take checks not knowing where it came from."

Hotels, motels, RV parks and other short-term rentals in Hillsborough collect a 5 percent tax, known as the tourist development or bed tax, on every dollar spent. The money goes toward the county's tourism marketing budget and to maintain its sports stadiums and other frequently visited sites.

But Airbnb — a web-based platform for people to post their spare rooms, guest houses or entire homes for travelers to rent for short stays — does not collect bed taxes in Hillsborough. The company has reached agreements to collect taxes with nine other Florida counties, including Pinellas, and with the state Department of Revenue, which works with 22 small counties.

According to an October press release, Airbnb collected \$630,000 in bed taxes for Pinellas County after the two sides reached a pact in December 2015 and \$15 million statewide.

Belden, though, has balked at some of the terms that other jurisdictions have signed off on and has sought to negotiate a different deal. He already has won several concessions from Airbnb. The company agreed to drop a lookback provision that would have waived all liability for any past unpaid taxes as well as a request to exempt the contract with Hillsborough from state open-records laws.

Pinellas County, on the other hand, agreed to accept both these provisions and its officials have lauded their positive relationship with the online rental company.

"We have been engaged in ongoing and productive conversations with Hillsborough policymakers about the prospect of a deal that would allow Airbnb to automatically collect and remit tourist taxes to the county on behalf of our hosts," said Benjamin Breit, Florida spokesman for Airbnb.

"We're passionate about helping to bring new revenue to county coffers as Tampa and its surrounding communities emerge as increasingly global travel destinations."

Belden has asked Sen. Jeff Brandes, R- St. Petersburg, to sponsor statewide legislation standardizing rules for Airbnb to operate in Florida so each county isn't negotiating its own terms.

"We are progressing, probably slowly, but the way to really make it work is legislatively fix some things," Belden said.

Airbnb has positioned itself as an alternative to traditional lodging for fans attending January's college football championship game at Raymond James Stadium.

Earlier this month, the company sent a letter to Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn boasting that more than 500 Airbnb "hosts" in the city "will allow Tampa to significantly expand its lodging capacity for college football travelers even as hotels sell out, keeping visitors within the corporate limits of the city" and offering to help "Tampa take full advantage of this economic opportunity."

Hillsborough County hotel occupancy is expected to be close to 100 percent in the days leading up to and after the game, said Santiago Corrada, president and CEO of Visit Tampa Bay, Hillsborough's tourism agency. Corrada said it would be "absolutely tremendous" if terms were reached with Airbnb before the game and the county could collect taxes on those rental nights.

"We know that Airbnb has a following and there are going to be people using it," Corrada said. Hotels "feel they're contributing and if you're going to be offering like services you should be contributing as well."

Buckhorn called Airbnb a "disruptive technology" that should be welcomed into the fold "if they're willing to pay taxes" and hosts don't change the fabric of residential neighborhoods.

"They have on more than one occasion expressed to me they are willing to pay their fair share, which is different than other fly-by-night operations," Buckhorn said, "And we should find a balance to make it work."

*Contact Steve Contorno at [scontorno@tampabay.com](mailto:scontorno@tampabay.com). Follow @scontorno.*

Airbnb nears tax deal with Hillsborough County as college football championship  
nears 12/15/16[Last modified: Thursday, December 15, 2016 9:14am]

[Photo reprints](#) | [Article reprints](#)

© 2016 Tampa Bay Times