



As Airbnb's competitors grow, Florida tax collectors work to strike more deals

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Airbnb may be king pin when it comes to room and home sharing — but it's not the only player.

And some of those other app and website offerings out there may even look cheaper to a vacationer hunting for the best deal by foregoing a hotel for a night in someone else's house.

That's because most of those apps aren't charging required tourism taxes up front — the kind hotels pay, and that Airbnb has agreed to take on behalf of its users in 39 Florida counties.

So what's a county to do in order to get the thousands of dollars it's rightfully owed?

Largely, county administrators are left to figure that out on their own.

"There's hundreds of these companies that do what Airbnb does," said Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden. "What I'm going to look at — it takes a lot of time to negotiate. So what is the investment of time and the return of that investment?"

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It took Belden eight months to negotiate the Airbnb contract after the app started approaching counties across the country.

Airbnb remitted about \$562,000 to Hillsborough County last year in the 11 months the agreement was active. By comparison, Hillsborough County gets about \$30 million a year from hotels, he said.

"So it's money, please don't think I take that lightly," he said, "but it's not a huge bulk of (our budget)."

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Still, Belden said he's steadfastly identifying the other big players worth viable tax deals.

Pinellas County, which got \$1.87 million in remitted AirBnb tax dollars last year, is also trying negotiate more agreements, said county spokeswoman Andrea DiFonte.

At the top of both county's lists: HomeAway and VRBO.

Both apps are owned by Expedia, Inc. And right now Broward is the only Florida county with which the company has a tax agreement, according the HomeAway website.

"We were persistent enough that they responded," said Broward County assistant administrator Alan Cohen. "The deal we made with them is virtually identical to the AirBnb nomenclature."

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HomeAway, which operates VRBO now, didn't return requests for comment about whether it plans to set up other Florida tax agreements.

On its website, HomeAway says its users are responsible for collecting and remitting lodging or tourism taxes themselves in areas where no agreements are in place.

If they don't, the tax collectors officer could audit them. But the sites don't list the names or exact addresses of the properties they're offering out — meaning the owners easily remain anonymous.

Even AirBnB's agreement with Tampa Bay counties doesn't allow the company to share its user information. The records the county gets from AirBnb, according to Belden's office, use terms like "Homeowner A" rather than names and addresses.

Cohen said the HomeAway deal with Broward went through in November, but he couldn't say yet how much they've received. He said Broward had also recently struck two similar tax agreements with TripAdvisor, a travel site, and MisterB&B, which targets its home vacation rentals to gay men.

Broward got nearly \$1.9 million from AirBnb in eight months it had its agreement last year.

"We expect the AirBnb money to stay constant," Cohen said. "But we expect the HomeAway revenue to increase over time."

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HomeAway, VRBO.com and VacationRental.com all fall under Expedia's umbrella, and Cohen said he wouldn't be surprised if other smaller apps combine as bigger conglomerates in the future.

Belden said he plans to work with legislators next sessions to regulate the room sharing industry beyond tax dollars — such as whether homes are safe and up to fire codes.

For now, he's focused on getting what money he can for the county by reaching out to more of the apps.

The tax collectors don't expect the apps to come to them.

Belden is using Hillsborough's Airbnb contract as a template and standard the other apps have to meet.

"If we're going to do it," he said, "we're going to do right."

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