

Tampa Bay Times



WINNER OF 12 PULITZER PRIZES

CONTROVERSIAL FEE FOR PRIVATE AUTO TAG VENDORS SPRINGS BACK TO LIFE



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Thursday, May 4, 2017 7:04pm



State Sen. Tom Lee, R-Thonotosassa, is pushing for legislation that would allow private vendors that issue auto tags and licenses to charge a new convenience fee that would encourage them to stay open after traditional business hours. [WILL VRAGOVIC | Times]

TALLAHASSEE — An optional new fee on licenses and tags renewed through private vendors sprang back to life in the Senate on Thursday, at the urging of Hillsborough County's elected tax collector.

The new fee is being sought by several county tax collectors and a lobbyist for for-profit vendors that want to issue licenses and tags to a growing universe of motorists.

"We have a lot of people who don't have time during the day to get this done," said Hillsborough Tax Collector Doug Belden, whose offices often have two-hour wait times. "I can reduce wait times during the week. Our core concept is customer service."

Other tax collectors oppose the idea.

The change would give private vendors power to charge motorists an undetermined "convenience fee," subject to approval of tax collectors or by county commissions in Miami-Dade, Broward and Volusia, which do not have tax collectors but which allow private vendors to sell tags and issue car titles and registrations.

At Belden's request, Sen. Tom Lee, R-Thonotosassa, added the "convenience fee" provision to a highway safety measure as an amendment.

"This is 100 percent voluntary," said Lee, who acknowledged that the proposal has "pros and cons" and that tax collectors are split.

"I understand how this could be a difficult issue, even for the tax collectors to come together on, one way or the other," Lee said.

Pasco Tax Collector Mike Fasano, who opposes the fee, disagrees with Belden about the fee.

"It is just wrong to raise fees," Fasano said. "This is not fair to our customers."

Tax collectors can't charge a "convenience fee" to drivers. Their fees are set by the state and have not increased since the 1980s.

As a result, tax collectors say the fees they charge don't cover the actual cost of driver services so they offset those losses with part of a 2 percent commission they charge homeowners to collect property taxes.

"I'm a businessman," Belden said. "If I was a CEO and I didn't find a way to minimize these losses, I'd be fired."

Belden said that through February, his offices served 22,000 more drivers than the previous year and that he issued about 10,000 car titles.

Fasano said that because the lines in Hillsborough offices are so long, many motorists drive north to his offices in Land O'Lakes and Wesley Chapel, which are open Saturdays.

"When the fees go up in Hillsborough, where do you think people are going?" Fasano asked.

Another tax collector, Larry Hart in Lee County, sent his colleagues an e-mail calling the fee a bad idea.

"It's sad we are going through this," Hart wrote. "This is what happens when individuals care more about themselves than the impact it will cause statewide for the rest of us."

Several Republican senators endorsed the fee, including Sen. Rene Garcia, R-Hialeah.

"This is really increasing access," Garcia said. "It's just adding more access points so individuals don't have to wait in line."

The state Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, which reports to Gov. Rick Scott and the Cabinet, has not taken a public position on the fee.

A statewide tax collectors' group also is neutral.

Last week, the House unanimously included the fee as part of a tax cut package, but it was removed when a Senate budget panel reduced the amount of tax cuts, so Lee revived it on another bill (HB 545).

The fate of the fee is uncertain because the bill was set aside after senators objected to other amendments, putting passage in question.

Latvala warned senators that the bill could fail on Friday, the last day lawmakers will vote on bills other than the budget until next year's session.

The fee is being pushed by lobbyist Chris Dorworth, a former Republican House member who represents the Orange and Seminole county tax collectors and a private tag vendor, First Manatee Tag Agency.

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Controversial fee for private auto tag vendors springs back to life 05/04/17 [Last modified: Thursday, May 4, 2017 7:17pm]

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