

Tampa Bay Times

Florida tax collectors prepare to fight backlash over auto tag rollback rules



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Friday, March 28, 2014 3:00pm

TALLAHASSEE — Within days, Gov. Rick Scott will sign into law his biggest legislative priority, a rollback of auto tag fees that will save the typical Florida driver \$25 a year.

But many motorists won't save a dime any time soon.

Florida's elected county tax collectors issue the tags, and they are aggressively trying to avert a taxpayer backlash, Pinellas County Tax Collector Diane Nelson said.

"Unfortunately, we have winners and losers when laws are passed," Nelson said in an email to a statewide tax collectors' group she chairs.

The potential losers are hundreds of thousands of Florida motorists who won't get a break this year because they have already renewed their tags for two years. The lower fees will take effect Sept. 1.

Hoping to head off taxpayer frustration, Nelson, along with tax collectors Doug Belden in Hillsborough and Mike Fasano in Pasco, are telling taxpayers not to renew their tags for two years, because if they do, they'll lose money.

But their cost-saving advice comes too late for owners of an estimated 756,000 cars who have purchased two-year registrations since July 1.

Fasano, a former Republican legislator whom Scott appointed to tax collector, said the Legislature should find a way to give a \$25 reduction to two-year registrants.

"Those motorists are going to be shafted," Fasano said, "and it's such an easy fix."

His most influential customer isn't so sure about that.

House Speaker Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, said the Legislature should find a way to fix the problem in the five weeks remaining in the 2014 session, but he's not sure how.



Gov. Rick Scott will soon sign the lower fees, a legislative priority, into law to take effect Sept. 1.

"It's something we should look at. I don't know if it's an issue we can address — myself included. I did the two-year renewal," Weatherford said. "I do think we ought to build in something that allows people to recoup money if they've paid for two years, but I don't know the mechanism to do it."

Motorists who were renewing their car tags in St. Petersburg this week said they appreciate news of a future savings.

"It was way too expensive already," said Mariel Gallagher, 31, of Seminole, a graphic designer who renews tags on her two cars annually to avoid a bigger hit in her pocketbook.

"I think it's beneficial," said William Smith, 59, a Seminole retiree. "They were a little expensive."

Tax collectors, who run for office every four years, are keenly aware of the value of customer service. They are using websites, news releases and mailings to get the word out to motorists to renew registrations for only one year.

Tax collectors also speculate that many motorists whose birthdays are in August will wait until Sept. 1, when the lower fees take effect. By law, a tag expires at midnight on the motorist's birthday, but the state highway safety agency said a minimum \$5 penalty for a late renewal can't be imposed until at least 10 days after the expiration date.

Motorists who procrastinate in an attempt to save \$25 are risking a much steeper fine if they're caught driving with an expired tag. But Leslie Palmer, a spokeswoman for the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, said the law is clear that a person who renews an expired tag would be eligible for the savings.

There's one more oddity to the fee reduction: Sept. 1 is a holiday, Labor Day, when tax collectors and private tag agencies will be closed. When the doors open on the morning of Sept. 2, Nelson predicted, "We're going to be bombarded."

She said the owners of nearly 100,000 cars and trucks in Pinellas buy two-year registrations.

She praised the Legislature for scaling back the unpopular high fees, which lawmakers imposed in 2009 to get the state through a budget crisis.

Some tax collectors cite another unfairness with the tag fee reduction: The biggest beneficiaries of the fee reduction won't be everyday Floridians but big rental car companies, many of them out of state, that register tens of thousands of cars in Florida each year. Orlando is the largest rental car market in the world.

"There's no question about that," said Belden of Hillsborough County.

The Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles reports 369,115 rental vehicles in the state that it classifies as "short-term leases."

Scott has until Wednesday to sign the tag fee reduction (SB 156) and will hold a bill-signing ceremony in Tallahassee with legislative leaders, who have been celebrating the reduction for weeks — including the fact that the record fee increases of 2009 were signed into law by Scott's leading Democratic opponent, former Gov. Charlie Crist.

Jack Cook, a 36-year-old technology professional from St. Petersburg, said the cost saving is "significant" but won't affect how he'll vote in November.

"I would say there's probably more pressing issues than vehicle registration," he said. "It's a nonfactor."

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