

Hillsborough tax collector offers to take on regulating cabs, Uber for embattled agency

- [Steve Contorno, Times Staff Writer](#)

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TAMPA — The embattled Hillsborough County Public Transportation Commission has in the last six months seen its chairman leave, a commissioner quit and its former executive director investigated for public records violations.

So who in their right mind would want to take on its responsibilities?

Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden, that's who.

Belden has offered to take over the PTC's regulatory duties if the Florida Legislature goes through with plans to dissolve the agency and put the county in charge of regulating for-hire vehicles, he told the *Tampa Bay Times*.

"No one can do this better, faster and cheaper than our office," Belden said.

Belden said his office has a lot of the pieces in place to effectively regulate the industry. The tax collector already handles vehicle inspections for the state Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, and it conducts background checks, including fingerprinting, for concealed carry permits.

Hillsborough County Administrator Mike Merrill would be happy to outsource the work of the controversial agency rather than move it in-house, he said.

"This is right up his alley and he does a really good job," Merrill said. "I would prefer that someone with existing ability to do it takes it, than us having to create the agency ourselves."

The PTC is unique to Hillsborough County and was created by a special act of the Legislature to regulate for-hire vehicles, such as taxicabs, limousines and private ambulances.

This past year, though, the agency was embroiled in the debate over how to regulate so-called ridesharing companies like Uber and Lyft. That issue will likely be determined this year by Tallahassee as well.

Amid the fight, the agency's executive director, Kyle Cockream, came under fire for working with taxicab and limo companies to run sting operations against illegal Uber and Lyft drivers. Cockream, who resigned, is now under investigation for a possible violation of public records laws relating to cellphone text messages.

"I am in no way going to get involved in any politics that involves this industry," Belden said. "I would simply help the county out."

It's not entirely clear what will happen to regulatory responsibilities if lawmakers dispose of the PTC, or even if they will take that step. Several area lawmakers, though, have vowed to eliminate it.

Merrill expects that the local jurisdictions will be put in control, and, if allowed, the county could hire Belden's office to run most of the operations.

County Commissioner Al Higginbotham, chairman of the PTC board, said the move makes sense. But he cautioned not to get ahead of the Legislature, which in the past has had a lot to say in how taxicabs and the like should be regulated.

"I don't want to stir up the hornet's nest any more than it has already," Higginbotham said.

Tampa could potentially piggyback off the county's agreement with Belden's office as well.

"It absolutely makes sense it'd be done on a countywide basis," said Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn. "If it's able to fit in his bailiwick, I'm fine with that."