

Offices lose on licenses

Tax Collectors say DMV services cost them millions each year; one may file a lawsuit.

BY STEVE CONTORNO

Times Staff Writer

TAMPA – It costs \$54.25 for a first-time driver’s license in Florida, a transaction that in most counties takes place at the tax collector’s office.

The tax collector’s share of that fee is \$6.25. The rest goes to the state to pay for everyday government services.

But local county tax collectors say they lose millions of dollars each year performing motor vehicles and driver’s license services for the state. And now one of them, Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden, is considering legal action for what he calls an unfunded state mandate.

Belden told the *Tampa Bay Times* it costs his office more than \$18 in personnel and labor costs to provide someone a driver’s license. That means each time someone stops in one, his office loses more than \$12.

And his office provides other motor vehicles services for the state at a loss. Registration costs him \$6.31 and a basic title transaction nets negative \$12.

And his office provides other motor vehicles services for the state at a loss. Registration costs him \$6.31 and a basic title transaction nets negative \$12. In some cases, the local share of some of those fees haven’t changed since 1984.

In all, Belden projects his office lost more than \$16 million providing license and motor vehicle services for the state, and local taxpayers had to cover the cost.

“I don’t know of any business that can break even getting the same fees since 1984,” Belden said. “I’m not trying to turn a profit. But our share needs to be sufficient to fund these expenditures.”

Belden isn’t alone. Pasco County Tax Collector Mike Fasano said his office loses \$3 million a year providing these services for the state and would be “surprised if an tax collector in the state is in the black when it comes to motor vehicle services.”

Last year, Belden’s office returned \$14.6 million of the property taxes his office receives to operate. He could have more than doubled that, he said, if the state shared more of these fees.

Ditto in Pinellas County, said Andrea DiFonte, spokeswoman for the Pinellas County Tax Collector’s Office. Fasano returned about \$1.1 million in Pasco.

If we weren't losing money on driver licenses, we would be able to return more money to our local taxing authorities," DiFonte said.

The Legislature voted in 2010 to put county tax collectors in charge of drivers' licenses with a takeover date of 2015. Hillsborough issued 136,000 drivers' licenses and identification cards in 2017 and Belden expects that to increase to 178,000 this year.

Belden said he will seek a legal opinion of whether this law is an unfunded mandate on tax collectors in violation of the state Constitution. In preliminary conversations with lawyers, he said it is unlikely they can force the state to give counties more money, but they may earn the right to stop delivering these services.

"We need to look at our options," Belden said.

Fasano said he would prefer to avoid a lawsuit. The former lawmaker said he hopes he can work with the Legislature on a remedy. He opposed increasing fees, but the state should increase the local share.

"People are being charged enough already," Fasano said. "We'll do a transaction that we're turning over the Tallahassee \$400, \$500, and our office maybe keeps \$10. And you're paying employees \$15 an hour. I didn't get into the business to make money but Pasco taxpayers shouldn't be subsidizing the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles."

It may soon be harder to raise fees anyway.

Lawmakers voted this year to put on the ballot a constitutional amendment that would require a two-thirds vote of the House and Senate to raise any taxes and fees.

"As time passes the cost to delineating services at the local level is increasing and yet the Legislature isn't sensitive to those deltas," said state Sen. Tom Lee, R-Thonotosassa. "It's going to be harder to fix the disconnect if you increase the threshold for reconciliation."

Contact Steve Contorno at (813) 226-3433 or scontorno@tampabay.com Follow @scontorno.