

Tax collector expands with new office to meet growing needs in booming Southshore

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TAMPA — The population of southern Hillsborough County has grown by about 11 percent since 2010, more than twice as fast as the rest of the county.

Planners say even more people will call the area home in the next few years.

To keep pace, the Hillsborough County Tax Collector's office has opened a new center in Ruskin for residents to obtain drivers licenses, pay their taxes and get hunting and fishing licenses.

Officially, the office will cater to Southshore, a designation for the once mostly rural area that includes Wimauma, Apollo Beach, Riverview and Ruskin. With much of the county built out, it has become a go-to area for developers, especially since much of it lies within the urban services boundary, the portion of the county where government services like roads and utilities are concentrated and development is encouraged.

It is also home to an Amazon distribution warehouse.

"We look at ZIP codes; we look at growth and we have Amazon that built down there," said Tax Collector Doug Belden. "We have to cater to those folks."

The new 14,000-square-foot office at 406 30th Street cost about \$3 million but is a good deal for taxpayers, according to Belden.

It was built on land owned by Hillsborough Area Regional Transit authority and the county. The parcel will be leased to the tax collector for a nominal amount for the next 50 years. The agreement also requires the Tax Collector's Office pay for a new bus stop outside.

The deal means Belden's office avoided buying land, which he estimates could have cost as much as \$1 million. It also means taxpayers will no longer have to pay the \$135,000 annual lease for a smaller tax office that was run out of the Sun Point Shopping Center.

The Tax Collector's Office has struck similar deals for other new locations opened in the past few years, including Brandon and Drew Park.

"I'm a big proponent of governments working together," Belden said. "You save so much money."

While many of the tax collector's services can be accessed online, there is still heavy foot traffic at the office's eight branches. About 5,000 people seek in-person service every day, Belden said.

Many of those visits are for drivers' licenses. 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.

The Southshore area is booming as a result of residential, educational, medical and industrial development, said Melanie Rimes, executive director of the SouthShore Chamber of Commerce.

The Hillsborough Metropolitan Planning Organization estimates that the population of Southshore grew 11 percent to 197,600 in 2015. That includes more than 82,000 homes, an 8 percent increase since the 2010 Census.

"Southshore continues to thrive and there is a constant need for improved services for residents," Rimes said. "This beautiful new office is a direct result of the growth all around us."

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