

Editor: State should pay full cost of issuing Florida driver's license

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Times Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden's office spends \$18 in personnel costs to provide a license. That means he loses \$12 on every transaction.

It's easy for Gov. Rick Scott and the Republican-led Florida Legislature to preen about holding the line on taxes when they are merely shifting so many costs to local government. It's good to see another locally elected official pointing to another example of the unfair burden being transferred to area taxpayers when it belongs in Tallahassee.

It costs \$54.25 to obtain a first-time driver's license in Florida, a transaction that typically takes place at the tax collector's office in each county. But the county tax collector's share is only \$6.25; the rest goes to the state to pay for everyday public services. So it costs local county tax collectors millions of dollars every year to process these transactions for the state — money that otherwise would flow right back to their own communities to pay for local needs. It happens year-in, year-out and amounts to legislatively sanctioned theft, and small, poor counties are hurt the most. They have trouble enough scraping together the resources to pay for basic public services.

Now Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden is doing something about it. His office spends \$18 in personnel costs to provide a license. That means he loses \$12 on every transaction. In some cases, the local share of these fees hasn't changed since 1984. In all, Belden estimates his office lost more than \$15 million last year providing services for the state. That's money that he otherwise would return to local coffers. For a growing county like Hillsborough that doesn't have enough cash to pay for transportation needs or even the maintenance backlog in the schools, this is real money being lost merely because the governor and Legislature are neglecting their responsibilities.

Belden said he will seek a legal opinion on whether this law is an unfunded mandate that violates the state Constitution. Counties may not be able to force the state to pay more, but they could earn the right to stop providing these transactions. That would put this burden back where it belongs — on the governor and Legislature, who are responsible for funding statewide services. Pasco County Tax Collector Mike Fasano said he would prefer working with legislators rather than filing suit. But with Pasco losing about \$3 million a year, Fasano agrees that local taxpayers shouldn't be on the hook for state obligations. Pinellas County estimates it lost \$9 million last year in unfunded mandates from the state.

This situation won't get better on its own. Local governments have complained for years about a variety of cost-shifting and unfunded mandates emanating from Tallahassee. Yet House Speaker Richard Corcoran, whose assault on home rule was a trademark of his bullying leadership, declared last year that the Legislature was more responsive to Floridians than local government. Baloney.

Lawmakers voted this year to put a constitutional amendment on the November ballot that would require a two-thirds vote of the House and Senate to raise any taxes and fees. If anything, the Legislature has moved to cement its practice of shifting state costs to the local level. Whether Belden can help to end this abuse remains to be seen, but he has brought attention to the practice and clearly framed its impact to local communities. Other tax collectors should join him in holding the Legislature accountable.