



## Ill-advised rush on license plates

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The Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles is inviting trouble, public backlash and a costly legal battle by rushing to change how the state produces and distributes license plates. The department needs to slow down and open up the process and justify why the state needs new plate technology and why distribution should be taken away from county tax collectors who currently do the job extraordinarily well.

The department says the state might save money by contracting with private industry to manufacture and issue the millions of plates that go out every year. That's fine — but why raise suspicion by fast-tracking the bidding process or ignoring the tax collectors who insist they can provide cheaper and better distribution service?

Earlier this week, at a closed-door meeting, the collectors asked the state to withdraw the bid request and empanel a committee to study whether tax collectors or private businesses would provide the best service and price. The agency is expected to respond to that request by Monday. But not shopping around for competitive value is senseless. And ignoring the track record of locally elected tax collectors who have provided this service to their constituents for decades renders the whole bidding process suspect. It also goes against the very promise that highway chief Julie Jones made in October that she would hit the pause button and restart the dialogue with local officials.

Jones has not yet made a convincing case for replacing the raised-letter plates with flat-letter models, which the agency insists are easier for toll facilities and red-light cameras to read and could be a platform for future technologies. And even if she had, the manner by which her agency has rushed the entire process will stifle competition from many potential bidders, including the current plate manufacturer, St. Petersburg-based PRIDE, a nonprofit that uses Florida inmate labor.

The state's initial timetable called for barely two months between the time the solicitation for bids was issued in November and a provider was expected to be chosen in January. While the department pulled back from that rush job under public and political pressure, it is unclear whether the agency is genuinely seeking input from local officials or merely stalling for time. This is a 10-year contract that will involve the handling of some 18 million license plates. The state needs to get this right, and the only way is to work with the tax collectors and encourage manufacturing competition. All that is assured now is a legal battle.

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