



Florida backs off license tag fight

By [Brittany Alana Davis](#), Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

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TALLAHASSEE — Backing away from a possible court fight, the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles announced Friday that it will halt its attempt to bid license tag services to private vendors.

Tax collectors — who distribute state tags — and two manufacturing groups tried to block the change by lobbying elected officials and filing legal action against the department.

Highway Safety Chief Julie Jones had wanted to save money by paying private companies \$31.4 million over two years to make tags and distribute mail and online orders, but she abandoned the idea under pressure from Attorney General Pam Bondi and Chief Financial Officer Jeff Atwater, among others.

"We listened to what everyone had to say, considered questions that vendors posed and received information from our tax collector partners," Jones said. "Based on the input, we have decided to withdraw (efforts to privatize)."

The decision will keep Florida out of administrative court, which is where it seemed headed Tuesday after department lawyers shut down tax collectors' requests to retract its invitation to bidders.

Jones' change of heart earned praise from Bondi, who said the department "did the right thing."

Manufacturing company Avery Dennison and St. Petersburg-based PRIDE, a nonprofit organization that uses prisoners to manufacture tags, filed formal protests and met with state officials this week.

For them, the state's decision may only be a temporary victory.

Stephen Hurm, an attorney for the state highway agency, told tax collectors Friday that the department will not seek to privatize plate distribution but could reignite the push as early as January to bid out the manufacturing role.

The state may want to switch from raised tags to the more modern flat tags that are thought to be more legible for red light and toll cameras. PRIDE doesn't have the equipment to make flat tags.

Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden says he will fight the state if it moves to exclude PRIDE.

"Why change a system that is working well and that customers enjoy? My job as an elected official is to provide the most friendly, capable customer service for the best price. We're doing that," said Belden, who criticized Jones for excluding tax collectors in her decisions.

Belden, along with PRIDE lobbyist Wilbur Brewton, argue that flat tags are no easier to read and are more expensive — which will result in more fees for motorists. The company may try to invest in new technology if that's what it takes to continue working with the state, Brewton said.

"Is the equipment currently sitting in the plant to do it? No," he said. "This could cause harm, but we would have to calculate that once we see the details."

Jones hasn't committed to any tag — flat or raised, she said. She just wants something legible and well-priced.

"We want to get the best product moving into the future in terms of technology, but at a cost that's affordable," Jones said.
"This is going to be done in a cost-effective manner."

The controversy over the tags is not expected to stall a planned redesign.

Floridians can continue to vote on four designs for a new state tag at Vote4FloridaTag.com. About 50,000 people have weighed in. The deadline is Dec. 14.

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