



Florida plans for new license plate

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TALLAHASSEE — The state of Florida plans to ditch its iconic green and white license plate for a new tag that officials say will be easier to read and will save money by making it simpler to catch motorists who evade tolls.

Pressed by Gov. Rick Scott to cut costs and free up more money for schools, the state highway safety agency is forging ahead with a redesigned plate, at a cost of \$31 million, that will be easier for cameras and police officers to see.

Currently, nearly one in six digital images is declared unreadable at toll booths by the Florida Turnpike Enterprise. Combined with other problems across the state, taxpayers lose at least \$7 million a year.

The new plates would be phased in over two years on Florida's 15 million vehicles, if Scott and the Cabinet approve.

The change would not come with a new cost to drivers, says Julie Jones, executive director of the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles.

"We're not taking money from anyone," she said. "We're not charging people more."

State experts say the need for a tag with a cleaner font is accelerated by growing use of red-light cameras and future expansion of toll roads that rely on technology to monitor motorists.

But such big change has spurred big controversy.

Tax collectors, elected county officials who distribute many of the state's tags, are fiercely protesting state plans to outsource distribution of tags online and by mail to a private, for-profit vendor. They also challenge the state's claim that the change will save money and won't cost motorists more.

"I'm dead-set against it," says Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden in Tampa.

In addition, the St. Petersburg-based company that oversees the current manufacture of plates by prison inmates is worried about losing business to a rival after three decades. The firm, known as PRIDE, does not own the equipment to make the flat tags.

"It's an integral part of our business, and we want to stay in the tag business," says PRIDE's lobbyist, Wilbur Brewton.

After a decade, the Florida tag is in need of a makeover, with its embossed combinations of six green letters and numbers, orange blossom in the center and county names at the bottom.

The new tag, fresh off the drawing board, will be flat, with seven bold black letters and numbers segregated against a white background. County names will disappear in favor of the words "Sunshine State" or the state motto, "In God We Trust," on standard tags.

If the state carries out the plan, it would be one of the most sought-after contracts since Scott took office. The estimated cost is \$31.4 million over two years.

The change would not affect specialty license plates, and motorists would be able retain vanity plates.

Scott's top highway safety official, Jones, says she will seek approval of Scott and the Cabinet on Oct. 23, then move forward with design and manufacturing plans. The Legislature would need to approve the upfront cost of replacing the plates.

A state study found that the current embossed license tag design, with letters and numbers combined together, makes it hard to distinguish a "B" from an "8" or a "Q" from an "O."

The study said the state loses more than \$7 million a year from unreadable plates and that some motorists are wrongly accused of evading tolls due to misread tags.

The Miami-Dade Expressway Authority estimated that it loses \$1.7 million a year.

Even though the new flat plates will cost more — at least \$2.20 per tag compared to the current cost of \$1.72 — Jones insists that the change won't cost motorists more money. She says savings from less waste and smaller inventories of unused plates will more than make up the difference.

The state currently charges motorists \$28 for a tag, but the cost is spread over the 10-year life span of the tag, appearing as a \$2.80 fee on each annual motor vehicle registration renewal.

Replacing 15 million tags in a two years will put pressure on county tax collectors, who value customer service.

"We deal with the public every day, and I hate to see them have to suffer," says Pinellas County Tax Collector Diane Nelson.

Nelson says the state could have saved money years ago if it stopped printing tags featuring the county names. She has 25,000 unwanted tags with the word "Pinellas" on them that will never sell because people don't want it.

"They want to be discreet," Nelson says.

Motorists will have a say in what Florida's new license plate looks like.

Sometime early next year, Jones says, the state will allow Floridians to choose their favorite license plate design in an online poll.

Three have variations of an orange symbol in the "O" in Florida, and a fourth has an orange in the upper left hand corner.

Jones says it's all about finding more money for Scott's stated No. 1 priority: schools.

"The governor has asked the agencies to dig deep. He wants to create savings across the enterprise so we don't cut education," Jones says. "I know these savings are to be had."

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