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Getting our license plates must be kept customer-friendly

By TBO.com

A state plan to centralize the license plate process looks to be another case of Tallahassee seeking to control fees while undermining service.

Lawmakers should be leery of the proposal by the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles.

The underlying goal is worthy enough — redesigning license plates so they will be easier to read by law enforcement officials and the cameras that monitor toll stations.

But not content to develop a plate with improved lettering, the agency proposes mailing the plates to customers from a central location.

Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden warns this would complicate and delay service.

At present, about 1,300 offices handle license plate transactions statewide, with county tax collector's doing the bulk of the transactions. The system, by all accounts, works well.

But with a centralized operation, citizens could no longer go to the tax collector's office, pay for the plate and obtain it immediately.

They would receive a receipt and have to wait for what the motor vehicle department says would be a "timely mailing."

"It's like going to Wal-Mart or Target and buying something, and then being told it will be mailed to you," says Belden.

This would be inconvenient to citizens and could be devastating to rental car and other businesses that handle large numbers of licenses.

The fleet industry estimates just a one-day delay in obtaining the license needed to get a car on the road

could cost it \$12 million a year.

There is no reason for the change in a system that is fast and customer-friendly.

Centralizing the operation might be a boon for the private vendor that gets the contract, but the public will pay the price in poorer service.

The agency hopes to drive more individuals to Internet transactions, an option citizens already have.

But Belden says the customers who visit his branch office do so "because they have to, not by choice. Most branch customers live paycheck to paycheck and cannot afford to renew online or by mail ahead of time. They come to renew just before the deadline to avoid late fees and traffic citations."

If the change goes through, they won't get the plate, only a promise it will be mailed soon.

This would represent another painful inconvenience for the public, which is finding it increasingly costly and inconvenient to obtain licenses.

In 2009, lawmakers increased the price of a driver's license from \$24 to \$48 and used most of the money to augment state revenue.

A federal ID law toughened the identification standards for obtaining a driver's license and has proved a challenge for many citizens, particularly the elderly, who do not have a birth certificate or other required documentation.

Before the state rushes into a centralized system, lawmakers should consider the perspective of public officials such as Belden, who have to implement these clunky policies and understand how much trouble they cause citizens.

"State officials are coming up with these decisions from a building in Tallahassee. They don't have to meet customers face-to-face. We do."

Common sense should prevail here. People need quick service. This scheme won't give it to them.

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