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Running over license plate logic

By TBO.com

The Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles appears to be plowing ahead with a plan to centralize the vehicle license plate operation.

This scheme may benefit a private vendor but is likely to inconvenience citizens and make the process more costly and less accountable.

Improving public service does not seem a concern.

If it were, the agency would be listening to the local officials who now handle license requests and understand the public's needs.

The stated goal of the proposal seems reasonable, if hardly worthy of such an abrupt and massive undertaking.

The agency says plates need to be redesigned so they will be easier to read by law enforcement officials and the cameras that monitor toll stations. According to the Florida Turnpike Enterprises, one in six license plates can't be read, which results in about \$7 million in reduced toll collections a year.

So for an estimated \$31 million, state officials would devise a flatter plate that would be manufactured and distributed by a private company.

And Florida's roughly 15 million vehicle plates would have to be replaced within two years.

This is irresponsible and unnecessary.

A redesigned plate has not been a priority of the Florida Sheriffs Association or the Florida Chiefs of Police Association. Law enforcement officials tell us their primary concern has been the large number of specialty plates that can make it difficult to tell if they are Florida tags.

A revamped plate might be helpful but is hardly a burning law enforcement issue.

So the primary objective here seems to be to improve toll collections, hardly a high priority for the

public. This might be more easily accomplished with improved tag-scanning technology.

If the justification for a new plate is questionable, the proposal to give a private firm a 10-year contract to make and distribute license plates is even more suspect.

The agency claims a private firm would save money, but there is no compelling evidence.

A nonprofit prison industries firm now makes Florida's plates. More important, the present distribution system is efficient and customer friendly.

The county tax collectors do the bulk of plate transactions and are accessible and responsive.

Car owners can renew licenses online, by mail or by coming to the tax collector's office, where they can pay for the plate and receive it immediately.

With a centralized operation, citizens would have no choice but to wait for the plate to be mailed. Individuals who delay renewal — either out of forgetfulness or lack of funds — would be at risk.

The change could be damaging to rental car and other businesses that handle large numbers of licenses and need them promptly. As we've written before, 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.

Yet the state would turn this chore over to a remote vendor with little accountability.

The department this week threw cold water on the Florida Tax Collectors Association's reasonable request to have the governor and Cabinet choose a task force to study the issue — which is exactly what the state should do.

This dubious scheme either should be subjected to more scrutiny or scrapped altogether.

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