

Tax collector: Be careful with online driver's license renewals

TALLAHASSEE — Doug Belden, Hillsborough County's tax collector, has a warning for people looking to renew their driver's licenses online: Read the fine print.

When you search the term "Florida driver license renewal" in Google, the top three hits — which are actually advertisements — link to private companies that charge "research" fees but can't renew licenses.

The state, however, does not charge beyond the actual services provided.

One of the sites, floridadriverslicensing.org, offers this disclaimer: "All of the information gathered can be found for free online, or you can let us do the work for you for a small fee," which is \$14.

But, "as always, many people do not read and they continue with the process," Belden said.

Google tells its users that it places ads, in a separate box with a different background color, on top of its search results "based on your current search terms."

A headline in the box says "Ads related to," followed by the search words used.

The first site says, "If you would like to do the research yourself, you may visit the official site directly." It then provides a direct link to the Florida Department of Motor Vehicles and Highway Safety.

"Don't be fooled," said Julie Jones, the department's executive director. "The websites skirt the law to trap unwitting consumers into paying additional fees."

In a statement, Jones said officials are "disappointed and disgusted" over the sites, but because they post disclaimers, "what they are doing technically is legal."

The second site, floridadriverslicenses.org, says it is “privately owned and is neither operated by, nor affiliated with, any government agency.”

It charges almost \$17 for a “License Easy Guide,” to assist with license renewals, changes of address and other services.

“It will help you gather the required documents so you don’t waste time making multiple trips to the DMV,” the site says.

Internet records show both sites are registered to “Domains by Proxy,” a privacy service of Go Daddy, the Web hosting company perhaps best known for its racy Super Bowl ads.

The service acts as a screen for companies that want a Web presence but wish to remain anonymous.

A Domains by Proxy representative reached by phone Wednesday declined to answer any questions about the sites, including the names of the businesses behind them.

In fact, Domains by Proxy’s trademarked slogan is “Your identity is nobody’s business but ours.”

The third site, dmvflorida.org, is registered to a “Florida Drivers Association,” which lists an address in northeastern Pennsylvania.

But an outgoing message on the telephone number listed for the organization goes to Network Solutions, another Web hosting company, and says the domain is “privately registered.”

Jones recommends Floridians bypass the middlemen and go straight to the source. The official site for license renewals is GoRenew.com.

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