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State drives up cost of motoring

The Tampa Tribune

For years state lawmakers have been finding clever ways to shift the costs of state services to local governments, then boasting about how they have kept state taxes low. It has gotten so bad that when local officials discuss unfunded mandates, they speak through clenched teeth.

This year the most irritated local official seems to be Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden, and with good reason. The state is jacking up fees for many of the state services his office provides. His workers are going to get the blame while the state gets the money.

What gripes Belden the most is driver's licenses.

The state reimbursement he receives per license does not cover his costs, yet he says his overhead is far less than the state allocates to its own offices for issuing a license.

"It's wrong to subsidize a state function," he tells us.

It's also confusing to taxpayers.

Three of his county offices provide that basic service, including the book test but not the road test. The three offices are 6283 W. Waters Ave. in Tampa, 2211 N. Falkenburg Road in Brandon and 3002 College Ave. in Ruskin.

Belden's staff takes pride in offering friendly service and short wait times. It would be wise for the state to reconsider its fee structure so drivers won't lose this useful service. Belden is not required to provide it, and not all tax collectors do.

It is also in the state's financial interest to keep the partnership alive. About one third of all licenses issued in Hillsborough County are through Belden's offices. In the process, he is losing about \$740,000 a year.

If Belden stops assisting the state in renewing licenses, he estimates it would cost \$2.3 million a year for state employees to pick up the slack. Plus, wait times at the Department of Motor Vehicles offices would be sure to increase.

Belden estimates his costs per license are \$13 to \$13.50. If you fail the test, he doesn't get paid.

The official state reimbursement to him has been \$5.25 per license and is going up to \$6.25. That is an extra fee added to licenses issued by Belden's office and is paid by the person getting the license.

That increase is also irking. For one thing, it still doesn't cover Belden's costs. For another, the increase is too steep. The object is clearly to fill the state's general fund, not provide better, quicker service to drivers.

Florida has been charging motorists \$20 to renew a license. It's going up, effective Sept. 1, to \$48, an

increase of 140 percent. The extra fee revenue will flow to the state while county taxpayers continue to subsidize the licensing operation.

Sharp increases are also coming for many other motor vehicle charges. The total yearly renewal fee for a Toyota 4-Runner with a personalized collegiate plate, for example, is increasing from \$85.10 to \$116.15.

The cost of getting an original title and registration is more than doubling.

The cost of transferring a car's title is going up 78 percent.

These fees hit low-income workers the hardest. They're also unfair to older drivers who don't drive very far.

A better source of revenue for roads is the gasoline tax. The more you use the roads, the more you pay.

These higher fees are not directly related to highway safety or building better roads. They're designed to raise money, period.

The recession forced many tough decisions, but legislators still found a way to avoid closing loopholes in sales taxes and restoring fairness to property taxes.

Various fees did have room to be increased, but motorists are going to find these increases shocking.

If you want to complain about the increases, contact your elected state representatives and senators. Don't direct your ire at Belden's tax clerks because they had nothing to do with it.