

Vicki Heflin, Ward County Tax Assessor-Collector

A massive overhaul of the vehicle registration fee structure is about to get underway, and it's important Ward County residents understand what's happening and why.

Beginning Sept. 1, more than 1,700 registration fee categories are reduced to nine weight classifications that create a more equitable, standardized, and simpler registration fee system.

These changes impact what Ward County residents will pay to register cars, light and heavy-duty trucks, motor homes (RVs), and trailers, including travel trailers. Because registration is paid forward, those of you with registrations that end in August 2011 already are seeing the new fees on your renewal notices.

The good news is some fees are being completely eliminated, and some residents will see a cost reduction.

The new fee simplification law, which was passed by the legislature in 2009, provides many benefits to taxpayers, including:

- A fixed fee means you'll always know what you owe.
- Weight classifications make the fees more equitable for everyone because what you pay is based on how much impact your vehicle has on Texas' roads.
- Vehicle dealers can accurately calculate registration fees for customers.
- Trucking companies can better determine their own registration costs.
- The Texas Department of Motor Vehicles will no longer have to spend tax dollars to maintain and program the complex fee structure in its database.
- Freeing up resources at our tax offices so representatives have more time to spend with you.

If you have an older car or light truck (6,000 pounds or less), be aware that you will see a small increase – around \$10 – to your registration fee. There are two reasons for this: The state determined the new annual base registration fee on the amount of wear and tear the vehicle's weight does to our roadways instead of vehicle age, and the new, annual base rate of \$50.75 creates a fixed fee that will not adversely impact the current collection of registration revenue. (For those buying new cars, the new fee is about an \$8 reduction.)

Everyone continues to pay the \$1 Department of Public Safety fee for TexasSure, the automated insurance verification program, and there is a \$1 automation fee for improvements to the state registration and titling computer system.

One fee eliminated is the 30-cent reflectorization fee. It was on everyone's registration renewal to help buy the reflective sheeting for license plates.

Also eliminated is the \$5 license plate transfer fee that was charged when you took off the license plates on a car or truck you traded in or sold and put them on the new vehicle you bought. Every time you sell or trade in a vehicle there are two important steps you must take to protect yourself: File the Vehicle Transfer Notification, which you can do online at www.TxDmv.gov, and transfer the license plates.

The notification removes your liability from anything the new owner may do with the vehicle and the license plate transfer protects your good name.

You need to think of your license plates as a personal identification number, and turning them over to someone else means that person can run up toll charges and even commit a criminal act

that points to you as the culprit. Now that transferring your plates is free, I encourage everyone to take advantage of this service.

The new law standardizes the license plate replacement fee at \$6, and does away with the fee for classic, cotton, forestry, volunteer firefighter, tow truck, and radio operator license plates.

Ward County residents who own trailers under 6,000 pounds will be pleased to know that the 75 registration fee categories for trailers are reduced to a fixed annual cost of \$45. And this includes travel trailers.

Truckers, trucking companies and those of you with other vehicles over 6,000 pounds, such as RVs, should no longer have to worry about whether you are paying the right registration fee. Gone are the 1,600 fee categories that these heavy vehicle owners had to use to determine what they owed. Instead there are seven weight classifications, which should make it easy for fleet owners and individuals to determine their costs.

Car dealers, too, often had difficulty determining the proper registration fee for customers because there were so many variables in the formula. Now, it's standardized.

County fees may still vary throughout the state because they are set by our commissioners.

We're glad to help all our customers, but we also know most Texans would prefer to handle it themselves. The new, simplified fee structure is going to help everyone to do just that. For those of you who need our in-office assistance, we're always here for you.

This standardized fee structure is not designed to make more money for the state or county. Its purpose is to apply common sense and fairness to what was a very complicated and complex fee structuring system that was difficult for many customers to understand and expensive for the state to maintain.

Plus the new categories set up to standardize registration fees are done in a way to ensure the state doesn't lose any registration revenue for building and maintaining Texas' roads and bridges. So now more than ever you can be proud to "Check the date, Love your state" and "Put Texas in your corner."

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