

Pearland cracks down on scofflaws

New program restricts auto registration for those with outstanding tickets, fines

By Sebastian Herrera | June 23, 2015

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A recently approved program that bars vehicle registration to those with outstanding traffic tickets, warrants or fines from the city of Pearland might eventually begin in other Brazoria County cities.

Through the "Scofflaw Program," which is an agreement between the city and county, unless offenders pay their charge as well as a \$20 administration fee, they will not be granted their new registration.

Scofflaw is defined as one who violates laws mostly pertaining to noncriminal offenses.

The program is now a significant resource to collect outstanding warrants, according to **Jennifer Huhn**, the city's municipal court administrator.

"We're hoping with letting the public know that if you do get a warrant, you can't get registration, and that may actually prevent them from (not paying their fine in the first place)," Huhn said. "I'm very optimistic this will be successful. I'm interested to see the numbers the (county tax-assessor collector) comes across."

The program went into effect in Pearland on June 9 after approval by county commissioners. Pearland Mayor **Tom Reid** signed the ordinance on May 11.

Past methods to get outstanding debts paid included sending out notices to individuals about their fines as well as putting a hold on their drivers license, Huhn said.

Pearland is the first city in Brazoria County to implement the program. The county has been using it at its tax collector offices since November after its own agreement to install it.

Huhn said Pearland decided to use the program as a result of a January switch to the same government collection agency as the county - Purdue Brandon Fielder Collins & Mott.

PBFC&M has represented the county in client and fee collections since 2001 and developed the program over the past couple of years, according to **Michael Darlow**, one of its attorneys. In total, PBFC&M represents more than 2,000 governmental entities in collection matters throughout Texas.

Darlow said tax collector offices for both the county and city are able to view records of any outstanding debts owed when individuals' licenses are swiped as part of the process to receive a registration sticker.

Besides Midland County in West Texas, which operates a similar program, PBFC&M only runs this program through Brazoria County. Working with other governmental bodies to make the program more widespread is forthcoming, Darlow said.

"Our next step is to talk to other cities in Brazoria County to engage their interest in participating," Darlow said. "From my aspect, that's where our firm is looking - providing that service to others that are already in that county."

Some cities in the county, such as Lake Jackson, have already inquired about the program, according to **Ro'Vin Garrett**, the county's tax-assessor collector.

"It is my intent to speak to any city that is interested in coming on to the program," Garrett said. "The program is available. The cities just need to contact me. I'm going to contact them, too. It's just a matter of an interlocal agreement being executed."

Garrett said all eight of the tax collector offices in the county are equipped with the program, including the two in Pearland.

She estimated the county has collected \$25,000 to \$30,000 in fines and fees since November as a result of the program. Some people have been denied their registration, Garrett said, but most pay their fines on the spot or return at a different time to do it.

To notify the public of its new program, the city of Pearland has been posting information on its social media accounts and has also had PBFC&M include information about the program in its collection letters, according to Huhn.