

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF ANALYSIS

BILL #: CS/HB 193 Towing and Storage Fees
SPONSOR(S): Local, Federal & Veterans Affairs Subcommittee; Cortes
TIED BILLS: **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:** SB 282

REFERENCE	ACTION	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR or BUDGET/POLICY CHIEF
1) Local, Federal & Veterans Affairs Subcommittee	15 Y, 0 N, As CS	Darden	Miller
2) Transportation & Infrastructure Subcommittee	10 Y, 3 N	Johnson	Vickers
3) Government Accountability Committee			

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

County and municipal governments may contract with wrecker operators to tow or remove wrecked, disabled, or abandoned vehicles from streets, highways, and accident sites within their jurisdiction. Counties and municipalities may establish a wrecker operator system to apportion towing services across multiple wrecker operators. Wrecker operators who participate in the wrecker operator system are known as authorized wrecker operators.

Counties and municipalities are authorized to establish maximum rates for the towing and storage of vehicles pursuant to an ordinance or rule adopted pursuant to s. 125.0103, F.S. or s. 166.043, F.S.

Some municipalities impose an administrative fee on vehicles towed by an authorized wrecker operator if the vehicle is seized or towed in connection with certain misdemeanors or felonies. The administrative fee is collected by the towing company on behalf of the municipal government and, in addition to towing and storage fees, must be paid before the vehicle is released to the registered owner or lienholder.

The bill prohibits a county or municipality from enacting a rule or ordinance that imposes a fee or charge on authorized wrecker operators. The bill does not prohibit a county or municipality from levying a local business tax on authorized wrecker operators and does not impact the ability of a county or municipality to impose a "reasonable fee or charge" on the legal owner of a vehicle if a county or municipal law enforcement officer has caused the owner's vehicle to be towed to and impounded at a facility owned by the county or municipality.

The bill also prohibits counties and municipalities from adopting or enforcing ordinances or rules that impose fees, other than reasonable costs, on the registered owner or lienholder of a vehicle removed and impounded by an authorized wrecker operator.

The bill has no fiscal impact on state government. The bill would have a negative fiscal impact on local governments, to the extent these governments are currently imposing towing and storage fees.

FULL ANALYSIS

I. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

A. EFFECT OF PROPOSED CHANGES:

Current Situation

County and Municipal Wrecker Operator Systems

A county or municipal government may contract with one or more wrecker operators to tow or remove wrecked, disabled, or abandoned vehicles from streets, highways, and accident sites.¹ After the establishment of such contract(s), the county or municipality must create a “wrecker operator system” to apportion towing assignments between the contracted wrecker services. This apportionment may occur through the creation of geographic zones, a rotation schedule, or a combination of those methods. Any wrecker operator that is included in the wrecker operator system is an “authorized wrecker operator” in the jurisdiction, while any wrecker operation not included is an “unauthorized wrecker operator.”²

Unauthorized wrecker operators are not permitted to initiate contact with a wrecked or disabled vehicle.³ If the operator of a disabled vehicle initiates contact, an unauthorized wrecker operator must disclose in writing, before the vehicle is connect to the towing apparatus:

- their full name;
- driver’s license number;
- that they are not a member of the wrecker operator system;
- that the vehicle is not being towed for the owner’s insurance company or lienholder;
- whether they have an insurance policy providing \$300,000 in liability coverage and \$50,000 in on-hook cargo coverage; and
- maximum rates for towing and storage.⁴

The unauthorized wrecker operator is also required to disclose this information to any law enforcement officer present.⁵ It is a second degree misdemeanor for an unauthorized wrecker operator to initiate contact or to fail to provide required information after contact has been initiated. An unauthorized wrecker operator misrepresenting his or her status as an authorized wrecker operator commits a first degree misdemeanor.⁶ Unauthorized wrecker operators also are prohibited from monitoring police radios to determine the location of wrecked or disabled vehicles.⁷

Counties are required to establish maximum rates for the towing and storage of vehicles removed from private property, removed from the scene of an accident, or where the vehicle is towed at the request of a law enforcement officer.⁸ Municipalities are also authorized to adopt maximum rate ordinances.⁹

Vehicle Holds and Wrecker Operator Storage Facilities

An investigating agency may place a hold on a motor vehicle stored within a wrecker operator’s storage facility for up to five business days.¹⁰ A hold may be applied where the officer has probable cause to believe the vehicle:

- should be seized under the Florida Contraband Forfeiture Act or Ch. 379, F.S.;
- was used as the means of committing a crime;

¹ Section 323.002(1)(c), F.S.

² Section 323.002(1)(a)-(b), F.S.

³ Section 323.002(2)(b), F.S.

⁴ Section 323.002(2)(c), F.S.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Section 323.002(2)(d), F.S.

⁷ Section 323.002(2)(a), F.S.

⁸ Section 125.0103(1)(c), F.S.

⁹ Section 166.043(1)(c), F.S.

¹⁰ Section 323.001(1), F.S.

- is evidence that tends to show a crime has been committed; or
- was involved in a traffic accident resulting in death or personal injury.¹¹

An officer may also apply a hold when the vehicle is impounded pursuant to ss. 316.193 or 322.34, F.S. and when the officer is complying with a court order.¹² The hold must be in writing and include the name and agency of the law enforcement officer placing the hold, the date and time the hold is placed on the vehicle, a general description of the vehicle, the specific reason for the hold, the condition of the vehicle, the location where the vehicle is being held, and the name and contact information for the wrecker operator and storage facility.¹³

The investigating agency must inform the wrecker operator within the five day holding period if the agency intends to hold the vehicle for a longer period of time.¹⁴ The vehicle owner is liable for towing and storage charges for the first five days. If the vehicle is to be held beyond five days, the investigating agency may choose to have vehicle stored at a designated impound lot or to pay for storage at the wrecker operator's storage facility.¹⁵

Authority for Local Governments to Charge Fees

Counties and cities do not have authority to levy taxes, other than ad valorem taxes, except as provided by general law.¹⁶ However, local governments possess the authority to impose user fees or assessments by local ordinance, as such authority is within the constitutional and statutory home rule powers of local governments.¹⁷ The key distinction between a tax and a fee is that fees are voluntary and benefit particular individuals in a manner not shared by others in the public.¹⁸ On the other hand, a tax is a "forced charge or imposition, operating whether we like it or not and in no sense depends on the will or contract of the one on whom it is imposed."¹⁹

Administrative Fees Related to Towing and Storage

Some municipalities charge administrative fees when a vehicle is towed in connection with certain misdemeanors or felonies.

The City of Sarasota seizes the vehicle of those arrested for crimes related to drugs or prostitution.²⁰ The registered owner of the vehicle is then given two options:

- The registered owner may request a hearing where the city must show by a preponderance of the evidence that the vehicle was used to facilitate the commission of an act of prostitution or any violation of ch. 893, F.S., the Florida Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act. The owner may post a bond equal to the civil penalty (\$500.00), hearing costs (\$50.00), and towing and storage fees (\$125.00 plus \$25.00 per day) to receive the vehicle back pending the outcome of the hearing, or the owner may leave the vehicle in impound, incurring additional fees.
- The registered owner may waive the right to a hearing and pay the civil penalty (\$500.00).

If the registered owner of the vehicle is unable to pay the administrative penalty within 35 days, the city disposes of the vehicle. The same process and rate structure is employed by the City of Bradenton.²¹

Other municipalities have enacted ordinances charging an administrative fee for any vehicle impoundment associated with an arrest. For example, the City of Sweetwater imposes an

¹¹ Section 323.001(4)(a)-(e), F.S.

¹² Section 323.001(4)(f)-(g), F.S.

¹³ Section 323.001(5), F.S.

¹⁴ Section 323.001(2), F.S.

¹⁵ Section 323.001(2)(a)-(b), F.S.

¹⁶ Art. VII, s. 1(a), Fla. Const.

¹⁷ *City of Boca Raton v. State*, 595 So. 2d 25, 30 (Fla. 1992).

¹⁸ *City of Miami v. Quik Cash Jewelry & Pawn, Inc.*, 811 So.2d 756, 758 (Fla. 3rd DCA 2002).

¹⁹ *Id.* at 758-59.

²⁰ Sarasota Police Department, *Vehicle Seizure Program*, available at <http://www.sarasotapd.org/vehicle-seizure-program/> (last accessed Jan. 31, 2017).

²¹ Bradenton, FL Code of Ordinances, ch. 54, art. IV (2016).

“impoundment administrative fee” on all vehicles seized incident to an arrest. The fee is \$500 if the impoundment stems from a felony arrest and \$250 if the impoundment stems from a misdemeanor.²²

The City of Winter Springs imposes an administrative fee for impoundment arising from twelve offenses enumerated in the authorizing ordinance, ranging from prostitution to dumping litter weighing more than 15 pounds.²³ The registered owner may request a hearing, either accruing additional storage fees pending the hearing or posting a bond equal to the amount of the administrative fee (\$550.00). If the registered owner waives the right to hearing, the administrative fee is reduced to \$250.00. These fees are payable to the city but are collected by towing companies.²⁴

By contract, some municipalities require wrecker services to pay a monthly fee for serving as authorized wrecker operators. For example, the contract between the City of Sarasota and a wrecker operator requires the operator to pay the city \$10,151 per month for “the opportunity to provide” wrecker services, as well as \$500 for each impounded vehicle sold by the wrecker service.²⁵

Effect of Proposed Changes

The bill would prohibit a county or municipality from enacting a rule or ordinance that imposes a fee or charge on authorized wrecker operators.

The prohibition would not impact the ability of the county or municipality to levy a business tax under ss. 205.0315, 205.033, or 205.0535, F.S. It would also not impact the ability of the county to impose a “reasonable fee or charge” by ordinance on the legal owner of a vehicle if a county or municipal law enforcement officer has caused the owner’s vehicle to be towed to and impounded at a facility owned by the county or municipality.

The bill also prohibits a county or municipality from adopting or enforcing an ordinance that imposes any charge, cost, expense, fine, fee, or penalty, other than reasonable costs related to towing and storage, on the registered owner or lienholder of a vehicle removed and impounded by an authorized wrecker operator. This prohibition does not apply to a reasonable fee or charge for towing and storage expenses if a county or municipal law enforcement officer has caused the owner’s vehicle to be towed to and impounded at a facility owned by the county or a municipality.

The bill does not impact any fees associated with an investigating agency’s hold of a vehicle under s. 323.001, F.S.

B. SECTION DIRECTORY:

Section 1 creates s. 125.01047, F.S., prohibiting counties from enacting ordinances imposing specific fees and charges on authorized wrecker operators.

Section 2 creates s. 166.04465, F.S. prohibiting municipalities from enacting ordinances imposing specific fees and charges on authorized wrecker operators.

Section 3 amends s. 323.002, F.S., prohibiting counties and municipalities from imposing fees and charges on the registered owner or lienholder of a vehicle removed and impounded pursuant to Ch. 323, F.S.

Section 4 provides an effective date of July 1, 2017.

II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

²² Sweetwater, FL Code of Ordinances, ch. 42-1, s. 42.1(c) (2017).

²³ City of Winter Springs, Ordinance No. 2016-01 (effective October 23, 2016).

²⁴ Winter Springs, FL Notice of Right to Hearing Form. A copy of this form is attached as Appendix A.

²⁵ Agreement for Wrecker Towing and Storage Services, City of Sarasota and J&G WFR, Inc. dba Direct Towing. A copy of the relevant portions of the contract is attached as Appendix B.

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

The bill may have an insignificant negative fiscal impact on local governments, to the extent these governments are using fees connected to towing as a revenue source.

2. Expenditures:

None.

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

The bill will reduce expenses for towing companies that are located in municipalities currently charging a fee.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

None.

III. COMMENTS

A. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES:

1. Applicability of Municipality/County Mandates Provision:

The county/municipality mandates provision of Florida Constitution may apply because this bill limits the ability of counties and municipalities to impose certain fees; however, an exemption may apply as the fiscal impact is likely to be insignificant.

2. Other:

None.

B. RULE-MAKING AUTHORITY:

The bill does not provide rulemaking authority or require executive branch rulemaking.

C. DRAFTING ISSUES OR OTHER COMMENTS:

None.

IV. AMENDMENTS/ COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE CHANGES

On February 8, 2017, the Local, Federal & Veterans Affairs Subcommittee adopted one amendment and reported the bill favorably as a committee substitute. The amendment prohibits counties and municipalities from adopting or enforcing ordinances or rules that impose fees, other than reasonable costs, on the registered owner or lienholder of a vehicle removed and impounded under ch. 323, F.S. The amendment also removes a list of situations where the prohibition on a local government imposing a fee on authorized wrecker operator would apply.

APPENDIX A

SECTION 2:

Pursuant to City Code, Section 12-100 the owner has the right to request a hearing in the following manner:

Within seven (7) business days of receipt of this notice, the owner, co-owner or lienholder may request a hearing by delivering to the Police Department, at 300 N. Moss Rd., Seminole County, Winter Springs, Florida 32708, a written request for a hearing.

Such request for a hearing shall include a valid telephone number and correct address where the owner, co-owner, or lienholder may be contacted.

The written notice must be received by the Police Department within the allotted time or the right to a hearing shall be deemed to be waived.

SECTION 3:

In order to retrieve the above described vehicle, the owner has the below options:

Owner, Co-Owner, or Lienholder Requesting a Hearing:

The Owner, Co-Owner, or Lienholder may secure release of the vehicle by posting a bond (cash, money order, or certified check payable to the City of Winter Springs) in the amount of \$550.00 submitted to the towing company. The Owner, Co-Owner, or Lienholder may then take possession of the vehicle from the towing company after payment of towing and storage charges payable to the towing company.

The Owner, Co-Owner, or Lienholder may leave the vehicle impounded and request a hearing directly from the police department Support Services Bureau.

Owner, Co-Owner, or Lienholder Waiving a Hearing and Submitting Civil Penalty:

The Owner, Co-Owner, or Lienholder may secure release of the vehicle by submitting a civil penalty (cash, money order, or certified check payable to the City of Winter Springs) in the amount of \$250.00 and submitted to the towing company during business hours.

The Owner, Co-Owner, or Lienholder then may receive the vehicle from the towing company after payment of towing and storage charges payable to the the towing company.

An executed written waiver shall bind both the owner and co-owner except as otherwise provided herein.

APPENDIX B

AGREEMENT FOR WRECKER TOWING AND STORAGE SERVICES

THIS AGREEMENT FOR WRECKER TOWING AND STORAGE SERVICES, made and entered into this 5 day of MAY, 2010 by and between the CITY OF SARASOTA, FLORIDA, a municipal corporation, hereinafter referred to as "CITY," and J & G WFR, INC. DBA DIRECT TOWING, a Florida corporation, hereinafter referred to as "DIRECT".

WITNESSETH:

WHEREAS, CITY has publicly announced an Invitation to Bid to obtain annual wrecker towing and storage services on an as needed basis pursuant to Invitation to Bid No. 10-08MK; and

WHEREAS, DIRECT has submitted a responsive bid which has been accepted by CITY to provide the CITY with the annual wrecker towing and storage services on an as needed basis; and

WHEREAS, CITY and DIRECT desire to formalize the terms and conditions of DIRECT's performance of such services as set forth herein; and

WHEREAS, the City Manager, pursuant to Sarasota City Code Section 2-5 (3) v. is authorized to administratively approve and execute this Agreement on behalf of CITY so long as the total compensation paid to DIRECT during the entire term of this Agreement, as may be extended, does not exceed Two Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$200,000.00).

NOW, THEREFORE, IN CONSIDERATION OF THE FOREGOING AND THE MUTUAL COVENANTS CONTAINED HEREIN, IT IS AGREED AS FOLLOWS:

1. Definitions: The following terms shall have the meanings herein ascribed to them:

A. *City Manager* shall mean the City manager of the City of Sarasota, Florida, or his designee.

B. *Police Chief* shall mean the Chief of Police of the City of Sarasota, Florida, or his designee.

C. *Project* shall mean the Scope of Services to be performed by DIRECT in furtherance of this Agreement. The Scope of Services shall include all labor, materials, tools, equipment, insurance and the like required to perform vehicle and vessel towing and storage services within the boundaries of the towing area on an as needed basis for CITY. A more detailed description of the Scope of Services is set forth in the City of Sarasota Police Department Vehicle and Vessel Towing and Storage Services section found on pages 13 through 20, inclusive, of Invitation to Bid No. 10-08MK. A copy of Invitation to Bid No. 10-08MK, as well as the Bid Form submitted by DIRECT in response thereto, are on file in the offices of

the Financial Administration Purchasing Division of CITY. Invitation to Bid No. 10-08MK, as well as DIRECT's Bid Form submitted in response thereto are deemed incorporated by reference into this Agreement. DIRECT covenants to strictly comply with all of the terms and conditions of Bid No. 10-08MK as well as DIRECT's Bid Form submitted in response thereto. In the event of any conflict between the terms set forth in the main body of this Agreement and Invitation to Bid No. 10-08MK, the terms and conditions set forth in the main body of this Agreement shall control.

2. Scope of Services: DIRECT shall diligently and timely provide all labor, material and equipment required for the Scope of Services for the Project in strict conformance with Bid No. 10-08MK as well as DIRECT's Bid Form submitted in response thereto and in strict conformance with all the terms and conditions of this Agreement. The parties hereby agree to be bound by the terms and conditions set forth in Bid No. 10-08MK as well as DIRECT's Bid Form submitted in response thereto. The Police Chief will notify DIRECT when an assignment within the Project Scope of Services may be available. DIRECT covenants to provide the Project Scope of Services within the time limits set forth in Invitation to Bid No. 10-08MK.

3. Payment: In consideration for CITY providing DIRECT the opportunity to provide the Scope of Services, DIRECT agrees to pay CITY a fee in the amount of Ten Thousand One Hundred Fifty One and 00/100 Dollars (\$10,151.00) per month. Said payment shall be submitted to the CITY prior to the 10th day of each month. This monthly payment shall be due and payable by DIRECT to CITY in advance for each month during the term of this Agreement. Furthermore, in consideration of the CITY not placing, attempting to foreclose or foreclosing a vehicle impoundment lien upon a vehicle impounded pursuant to Section 33-271 of the Sarasota City Code, DIRECT agrees to waive any and all storage charges to which the CITY would be obligated to pay as a result of the operation of any provision of Chapter 323, Florida Statutes, on any vehicles impounded by the City and stored by DIRECT. As further

consideration, DIRECT shall pay CITY Five Hundred Dollars (\$500.00) for each sale by DIRECT of a vehicle that was sold subsequent to a seizure initiated by the police department of CITY. Said payment shall be made to CITY within thirty (30) days of DIRECT'S sale of a vehicle which had been seized.

4. Term: This Agreement shall be effective upon complete execution by each of the parties hereto. The initial term of this Agreement shall expire one year thereafter. This Agreement may be extended upon mutual agreement of the parties for up to two additional one year periods under the same terms and conditions pursuant to an amendment to this Agreement.

5. Public Records: DIRECT acknowledges that it shall be responsible to totally and fully comply with the Florida Public Records Law as set forth in Chapter 119, Florida Statutes and all other relevant laws, rules and regulations regarding public records.

6. Termination Without Default: The City Manager shall have the right at any time upon fifteen (15) days written notice to DIRECT to terminate the services of DIRECT hereunder for any reason whatsoever. If the City Manager terminates this Agreement pursuant to this Section 6, DIRECT shall be entitled to a pro-rated refund of the monthly payment required by Section 3 above. The amount of the refund shall be pro-rated based upon the number of days remaining in the calendar month starting with the day after the effective date of termination.

7. Termination With Default: DIRECT acknowledges that the conditions, covenants and requirements on its part to be kept, as set forth herein, are material inducements to CITY entering into this Agreement. Should DIRECT fail to perform any of the conditions, covenants and requirements on its part to be kept, the City Manager shall give written notice thereof to DIRECT specifying those acts or things which must occur in order to cure said default, including the time within which such cure shall occur. DIRECT shall have seventy two (72) hours measured from the date and time of the written notice within which to cure the default.