

My Word

By Lisa Roberts

Even as President Obama is calling for support of struggling small businesses, Florida's Legislature may have unwittingly pounded the proverbial nail in the coffins of dozens of the state's most dynamic businesses, which operate as charities. How? By increasing specialty license plate fees.

In September 2009, the fee for a new specialty plate increased from \$14 to \$33. Add to that the \$15 to \$25 donation made to the plate's sponsor, and you get a clear picture of why overall sales of new specialty tags have plummeted by 67 percent. Consider: From November 2008 through January 2009, despite the down economy, there were almost 82,000 such tags sold. That time period a year later? 26,670 sales.

Donations from Florida's 113 specialty plates fund important social, cultural and environmental programs. They feed families in need; provide services for the blind; protect sea turtles, manatees and other endangered creatures; underwrite cultural programs; fund scientific research; support law enforcement; fight breast cancer and heart disease; aid military personnel and their families; provide university scholarships and more. But maybe not for much longer.

Ironically, the Legislature increased tag fees to generate revenue to help fill a gaping budget deficit. However, due to lagging sales, Florida stands to take in \$1 million *less* this year from the specialty tag program, which is self-funded by its receiving organizations. That amounts to \$10 million less over the next decade, which is the lifespan of a Florida license plate.

Yes, Florida's specialty license plates have seen their share of controversy. You've read about them in this newspaper's editorial column – that there are too many on the road, that law enforcement officers have trouble identifying them as Florida tags.

For the record, Florida's 113 specialty plates represent one tag choice per 159,292 residents. Maryland has more than 700 choices (1 per 8,000 residents); New York, 255 (1 per 76,471); Virginia, 183 (1 per 42,623), and so on. While lawmakers report specialty tags make it difficult for crime witnesses to identify Florida tags, law enforcement officers tell of catching crooks thanks to vehicle descriptions that included a specialty tag.

The fact that donations from these plates pay for important social, cultural and environmental missions goes unreported for the most part. Also unnoticed is the fact that their sponsoring organizations purchase a vast array of services within their communities and employ thousands of people statewide – from biologists to graphic artists to social workers.

If these organizations are put out of business, who will pay for the good work they currently do? The answer is that work most likely will not be done or that we, the taxpayers and consumers, will foot the bill.

Bills in both the House and Senate that would repeal the fees are standing still. Will the Legislature step up, admit it's made a mistake and make remedy? Or will some of the state's most worthy charities become charity cases themselves? Only your elected representatives in Tallahassee can answer those questions.

Lisa Roberts is the executive director of the Florida Wildflower Foundation in Maitland, which receives State Wildflower license plate donations.