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LIBERTY COUNTY TAKING TRAFFIC CITATION PAYMENTS ONLINE

Liberty County residents now have the option of paying traffic fines without leaving the comfort of their homes or offices.

Working with Harris Custom Programming, a local software company, J. Don Martin, sheriff, and F. Barry Wilkes, clerk of courts, of Liberty County have partnered to provide a new online program that lets people pay traffic citations with their credit cards.



Liberty County Sheriff's Office staff, Katina Tilley (seated) and Kelly Wiggins (center) and Linda Thompson (third right), chief deputy clerk of the Liberty County Clerk of Court's office review online traffic citation fine payment system that began on June 1.

In addition to saving residents time and money, the new option is helping county government operate more efficiently, according to Wilkes, who serves as clerk of the county's superior, state, juvenile, and magistrate courts. The online system, which does not cost taxpayers "one red cent," reduces the number of customers at the sheriff's and clerk's offices in the courthouse in Hinesville, costs for mailing documents, and personnel time in both offices, he said. It also decreases the number of people appearing in court on arraignment days, which eases the

courthouse parking crunch, he added.

"Through mutual concern for taxpayers' hard-earned dollars, the sheriff and I inveigled Harris Custom Programming to

develop and provide the online system without cost to taxpayers. Since Johnny Harris, a native

and lifelong resident of this county, is CEO and the principal owner (of the company), it was not hard for the sheriff and I to make out our case for letting users pay for the system, instead of taxpayers.”

Users are charged a "convenience fee" in the amount of three percent of the fine, plus a \$5 fee for each transaction. “Ironically, we have had no complaints about the fees thus far and they don’t appear to deter many folks from using it,” Martin said. "People would rather pay a small convenience fee than having to take time off work, using up their gas traveling to courthouse, trying to find parking when they get here, and getting to the courthouse before closing at five o’clock in the afternoon."

The new system has been in the testing phase for several weeks but officially went online on June 1. Neither the sheriff nor the clerk has publicized it since they wanted to ensure that everything was working properly before doing so. "We didn't want to get inundated with people wanting to pay online right away, just in case there were some glitches in the system," Wilkes said. Even with little publicity, traffic citation fines are already being paid online. Visa and MasterCard credit cards, including debit cards bearing the Visa or MasterCard logo, are accepted.

An independent study, he said, revealed that over 30 percent of people who received a traffic ticket would rather pay it online, regardless of a fee, if it would save them a trip to the courthouse. The remainder preferred to walk in, or pay the ticket by mail, to avoid the additional fee.

While other counties in Georgia offer Web-based payment of traffic fines, the local system is unique, Wilkes explained. "We are one of two counties in the state to have it incorporated into the vendor's automated case management program. When a fine is paid online, the sheriff’s staff and my employees don't have to go back into our traffic citation or case management systems and re-key information again. The computer automatically records the payment, posts the information into our accounting and case management systems, and closes the corresponding case."

Harris said that, at the end of each day, the clerk only has to press one computer key to update the system and close out all the tickets paid online that day. “It is a win-win situation for everyone. It provides convenience for offenders. Plus the sheriff’s office gets approximately a third of the county’s traffic citations paid on-line and the county does not have to pay additional fees for the service. Fines that offenders normally do not pay because they don’t have the money readily available or the time to go to the courthouse are more likely to be paid, thus increasing revenues for the county. The process has been completely automated to prevent any additional data entry with the only step being the balancing of the money,” he said.

Most traffic tickets can be paid online, but some violations still will require a court appearance, according to Sheriff J. Don Martin. Drivers cited for an accident, for speeding more than 90 miles per hour or for not having proof of insurance, will need to appear in court. Motorists who

are younger than 21 and who are ticketed for driving more than 24 miles over the speed limit also will be required to appear in court as the offense results in an automatic license suspension, he said.

“The clerks’ office and the sheriff’s office have worked together since 1993, when I took office as sheriff, to manage all the recordkeeping for traffic citations. My staff performs the front end clerical duties and the clerk’s office performs the back end, with data and computer programs shared by our staff on our network. This provides a seamless system for tracking citations and accounting for monies. With the new online traffic citation program, we hope to provide a means for enabling people to pay their traffic citation fines and thereby avoid suspension of their driver’s license for failure to do so. Research shows that, since they can use a credit card, they are more likely to do so,” Martin said.

The online traffic citation payment system can be accessed on the Web at www.libertycotickets.com.

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