

Tax Assessor-Collector Don Sumners' tips for saving gas & time

Dear Tax Office customer,

I want to help you save money and time in your transactions with the Harris County Tax Office. And, if you live in this county, you probably do business with my office by paying property taxes, renewing your vehicle's registration or registering to vote.

Below are numerous tips that will save your money, conserve our energy, reduce pollution and save your time by using our many online services, doing business by mail, telephone or at one of our 200 service partners around the county. These are even more important as gasoline approaches \$4.00 a gallon.

Property taxes may be one of life's certainties but they do not have to be unfair or inconvenient to pay. In addition to running my office honestly and efficiently, I am your advocate and will ensure our customer service is courteous, accurate and helpful.

The same attitude and values guide our work with vehicle licensing and registration and voter registration.

Here are the tips:

Vehicle registration

➤ Persons renewing vehicle registrations – even if they need plates – can get that done by mail or online. "We say, 'Get online, not in line.' And those lines can be long in the few days at the beginning and end of each month because so many people wait until the last minute ... or a bit past it," Sumners said.

Customers can renew online if they have the plate number and the last four digits of the VIN. Renewal can be done by mail – with the renewal notice or without the renewal notice – as long as a copy of the insurance card is submitted showing the correct vehicle. Just follow the instructions on the notice. More information is available at <http://www.hctax.net/Auto/Default.aspx> or by calling the auto help line at 713 274-8301.

➤ Another overlooked convenience is the network of about 200 grocery stores and other businesses which sell registration stickers – but not license plates -- for passenger cars, motorcycles, and small trucks (pickups, vans, and sport utility vehicles). At the locations of these service partners, you can renew your vehicle's registration during the month the registration is due or in the first five days of the next month. The service partners are listed at http://www.hctax.net/Auto/renewal_loc.aspx.

To use one of our service partners you must have your proof of insurance and the renewal notice with you in order to get the registration renewed. The limited service locations charge \$1.00 in addition to the normal renewal fee.

Using these service partners allows you to combine errands. For example, you can get your groceries and your sticker at the same place, saving a trip, time and money.

➤ Customers can get many vehicle-related questions answered -- in English or Spanish -- by using our pages of Frequently Asked Questions about vehicles. They are <http://www.hctax.net/Auto/vehiclesfaq.aspx> or, in Spanish, <http://www.hctax.net/ASP/span/vehicles/vehiclesfaq.asp>. Or, customers can call 713-368-2000 or email questions to tax_office@hctx.net.

Property taxes on homes

Property taxes can be paid online, by touch-tone phone and, of course, by mail.

➤ If you are mailing your payment, include the coupon. If you have lost the coupon, call our call center at 713-368-2000 and get your account number. Put the account number on the memo line of your check and mail it to:

Don Sumners, CPA, RTA
Tax Assessor-Collector
P.O. Box 4622
Houston, TX 77210-4622.

Or, you can print your tax statement from our website at <http://www.hctax.net/Property/current/currentsearch.aspx>. Put the account number on the memo line of your check and mail a copy of the statement with your check.

If you are not careful, mail can be the most expensive way to pay! To avoid being delinquent, you must pay your property taxes by 11:59 p.m. on a certain date. If you are mailing your payment, state law says the postmark stamped on your envelope by the U.S. Postal Service determines if you paid on time or if the payment is late.

Every year, taxpayers who thought they sent their payment in time end up paying many thousands of dollars in penalty and interest that they easily could have avoided paying. Here is what you do in the day or two before the deadline: Take your envelope containing your check inside the postal station and watch as it is postmarked by a clerk. Just dropping it in the box hours and hours -- or even days -- before the deadline might not get the postmark you have to have to show you

mailed it by the deadline. (Because of this issue, our office images the checks and images or retains the envelopes the checks come in.)

And, don't think that giving the check to a delivery service before the deadline is sufficient. The law says we must go by the postmark applied by the U.S. Postal Service. If the delivery service does not get the check to our office before closing time on the deadline day, you will owe penalty and interest.

So, please, consider using the online or phone services.

➤ At this time of year, the Tax Office is dealing with delinquent property taxes. The Tax Office accepts full or partial payment of property taxes. Taxpayers may use any combination of credit cards and/or e-Checks for payment online at www.hctax.net. Credit card and e-Check payments are also accepted by touch-tone telephone by calling 713-368-CARD (2273).

We accept American Express, Discover and MasterCard credit cards, and VISA credit or debit cards. A non-refundable surcharge of 2.15 percent will be added to each credit card payment transaction processed. VISA debit cards will be charged a flat fee of \$3.95. E-checks are free.

"The surcharge can bite but it is nothing like what the growing penalty and interest is doing to you if your taxes are delinquent. Paying some now will save you money," Sumners said.

➤ When bills for 2011 taxes go out, the then current taxes will be payable online by e-check, credit card or debit card. Payments may also be made by touch-tone phone by calling 713-368-CARD (2273). E-checks are free. A non-refundable transaction fee of 2.15 percent is added to all credit card charges. Visa debit cards have a \$3.95 transaction fee.

Voter registration

Even some voter registration functions can be handled online or by telephone.

➤ Anyone who is eligible to vote and a resident of Harris County can download an application in English, Spanish or Vietnamese, print it out, fill it out and mail it to Don Sumners, Tax Assessor-Collector and Voter Registrar, P.O. Box 3527, Houston, TX 77253-3527.

Applications are available at many places, including the public libraries of Harris County and the City of Houston and, of course, all the Tax Office branches. (For a map, see <http://www.hctax.net/MiscTax/Locations.aspx>.)

The telephone help lines are 713-274-8200 for English, 713-274-8201 for Spanish and 713-274-8202 for Vietnamese. Or you can email the Voter Registration department at tax_voters@hctx.net.

➤ If you registered to vote some months or more ago and are unsure about your status, go to <http://www.hctx.net/Voter/voter.aspx> and look for yourself in the database. If you have registered recently, you can check your status at <http://www.hctx.net/Voter/PendingSearch.aspx>.

➤ An address change within Harris County or a name change can be handled through the Texas Secretary of State by using this page <https://www.texasonline.state.tx.us/tolapp/sos/SOSACManager>.

➤ If you wish to cancel your voter registration, because you are moving outside Harris County, for instance, go to <http://www.hctx.net/forms/voterapps/VR004.pdf> and fill out and print out the form and follow the directions on mailing or faxing it.

If you've read this far, I know you've found some useful things. You are welcome! I'm glad I could serve you.

Don Sumners
Harris County Tax Assessor-Collector and Voter Registrar