



# Snafus snarl Cook County plans to take credit cards for property tax bills

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With first-half property tax bills due on Thursday, a lot of folks probably would like to charge the cost, as they would with any large expenditure.

In fact, under state law, the plastic option was supposed to be available in Cook County starting Jan. 1.

But almost two years after that state mandate was enacted, Cook County has yet to follow the law. Taxpayers won't be able to pay by credit card at least until sometime this summer — if, that is, a plan finally adopted last week by the county goes into effect as scheduled.

Officials say they have had good reason for the delay, including legal objections from a would-be contractor, alleged foot-dragging by former Cook County President Todd Stroger and technical woes.

But the chief sponsor of the state bill, North Side Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, suggests another reason: Some county officials privately would rather keep collecting 12 percent annual interest on overdue bills rather than collect their money on time and let credit card companies impose fees.

The county strongly disputes that. But there's no question that a lot of money is at stake. Cook County Purchasing Agent Lourdes Coss says the county's new credit card processor could earn \$30 million a year in fees.

Ms. Feigenholtz's bill was enacted in May 2010. It directs Cook County to accept credit card payment of property tax bills by Jan. 1, 2012.

She says she got the idea from a constituent. "I think (Cook County) may be the only county in the state that doesn't offer a credit card option.

The administration of outgoing county president Stroger was focused on other matters in his last months in office. As for the current president, Toni Preckwinkle, who took over in December 2010, a spokesman says she found "general dysfunction" with "no budget in place (and) no unified procurement process we needed to get this kind of project off the ground."

Indeed, one of the early decisions made by Ms. Preckwinkle's crew was to have just one plastic provider for county government. Since the sheriff and county clerk were using one vendor and the clerk of the circuit court another, officials decided to seek one bidder for everything.

Arranging all of that apparently took a little time. But last year, the county formally sought bidders for an unified deal.

Four finalists were selected, with VitalChek Network Inc., a division of Lexis Nexis, winning the competition.

But then Government Payment Services Inc., which had the pact with the clerk of the circuit court and county's revenue department, objected. It filed a series of actions in Cook County Circuit Court, saying that the winner did not submit a correct bid.

The county ended up redrafting and rebidding the matter. Lexis Nexis again won, agreeing to charge a fee of 2.13 percent to those who charge county payments.

Government Payment Services' lobbyist is Craig Chico, brother of former mayoral hopeful and Chicago Board of Education President Gery Chico. He did not return repeated phone calls on what, if anything, his company will do now, but General Counsel Laura Lechowicz-Felicone says she is confident the pact approved last week by the county board will withstand any legal challenge.

Purchasing Agent Ms. Coss notes that the Feigenholtz bill made the Jan. 1 date "subject to compliance with all applicable purchasing requirements." In fact, she says, "the bidding process does take some time."

Now that a processing vendor has been selected, it will take "three or four months" to program computers and get the system up and running, she said. That means taxpayers should be able to charge second-half bills this fall.

Ms. Feigenholtz is still steaming.

"They've have two years to do this," she says. "What am I supposed to tell my constituents who asked for this?"

"I passed the law," she says. "No wonder people are cynical about government."

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