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Feb. 27, 2013

Tax commissioners from central Georgia counties urged vehicle owners to have patience with their staffs and to consider staying away from the tax office this Friday unless they have urgent business.

Friday is the day when changes to Georgia's automobile taxes take effect, but unless their taxes are due in March, those who have to make decisions have more time to do so, said Richmond County Tax Commissioner Steven Kendrick.

"March 1 is the day it starts, but March 1 is not the only day it will happen," he told a small group gathered Tuesday morning at Bobby Jones Ford in Augusta. "Everyone doesn't have to come to the tax office on March 1 to opt in to this program."

Kendrick, along with tax commissioners from Burke, Columbia, Jefferson, Lincoln, McDuffie and Warren counties issued a joint statement Tuesday in an effort to get the word out about the new law and how it will affect car owners.

The law replaces the yearly ad valorem tax, or "birthday tax," on vehicles with a one-time "title tax" of 6.5 percent when a car is purchased or transferred to another party.

"What most people have heard is that the birthday tax is going away," Kendrick said. "What we are here to say is that in some regard that is true."

Kendrick said there are three main categories of car owners who will be affected:

—Residents who who bought a car before Jan. 1, 2012, will continue to see yearly ad valorem tax bills due on their birthdays.

–Those who buy cars starting Friday will be exempt from sales tax on the vehicle,

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One provision of the new law allows people to transfer vehicles to immediate family members for a reduced title tax of 0.5 percent, but that is only if they have already paid the full 6.5 percent title tax in a previous transfer, said Takiyah Douse, the director of Richmond County's Motor Vehicle Division.

Douse said people will have to sign an affidavit swearing they are related to take advantage of the reduced rate.

The new law will have its biggest effect on sales between private individuals, Douse said. Those sales were exempt from sales tax, but now will be subject to the title tax. Douse emphasized that for used cars, the tax will be based on the vehicle's fair market, not the purchase price.

She said the tax will have to be paid to register the vehicle and receive a tag.

Richmond County tag offices will be open normal hours Friday, but other counties, including Burke, will be closed part of the day for training.

Columbia County Commissioner Kay Allen said her office will be closed Friday morning to give her staff time to become accustomed to the new system. She expected longer wait times Friday afternoon because there will be more information to gather about each vehicle.

"We are going to be asking a lot of questions," Allen said. "Friday morning we are going to take time and we are going to practice."

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