

Foreign visitors can drive in Florida with their licenses from home — for now

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A new law requiring foreign visitors to have international driving permits to drive in Florida will not be enforced because it violates an international treaty, highway safety officials said Friday.

During the 2012 legislative session, the Florida Legislature amended the law, requiring foreign visitors to have an international driving permit — usually priced \$15-\$25 — to drive lawfully in Florida. Foreign drivers without the permit translating their license information into English and nine other languages.

Though the law went into effect Jan. 1, 2013, it did not get widespread attention until foreign journalists started asking questions earlier this week. The story quickly spread in Canada, prompting worried calls and lines at some offices of the Canadian Automobile Association.

“Honestly, some days I just shake my head at the insanity around us,” wrote Jim Byers, the Toronto Star’s travel editor, on his blog. “For a state so dependent on tourism, this is unbelievably stupid.”

Late Thursday, the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles said the requirement may violate the 1949 Geneva Convention on Road Traffic. International treaties sign by the U.S. take precedence over state laws, the department said, and ruled that the Florida Highway Patrol would hold off enforcing violations until the law was clarified, according to a statement.

Visit Florida was concerned that the law could have impacted visitors and deterred tourists, said spokeswoman Kathy Torian. In 2011, about 12.6 million foreigners visited Florida, according to the agency.

“We’re just relieved that this was acted on so quickly as it came to the attention of state officials,” Torian said. “So visitors, especially from the U.K. and Canada, as they come on their spring breaks next week, will have no concerns as far as this is related.”

Nicki Grossman, president and CEO of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitors Bureau, said the organization has fielded about 100 calls and the same number of emails since the law was publicized. She found out about it from a Canadian reporter Wednesday night.

“Clearly we would have challenged it; we would have talked to the legislators; we would have done what we needed to do to make the provisions more acceptable to our visitors,” she said. “You pass something like this, and a million dollars isn’t going to resolve the kinds of issues that were created in 24 hours yesterday, the unbelievable negative attention on the state of Florida in Canada.”

Last year, more than 950,000 Canadians visited Broward and spent nearly a billion dollars, Grossman said. In 2011, the last full year for which figures are available, 3.3 million people visited the state from Canada, Florida’s top international market. Of the nearly 7 million foreign visitors who came to Miami-Dade in 2011, 500,000 were from Canada.

“You can’t mess with Canada,” Grossman said.

Though the new law also would have affected car rentals, rental car companies may not have even been aware the law had changed six weeks ago.

Hertz, for example, has not been requiring foreign renters to have international driving permits, said spokeswoman Paula Rivera. So the suspension makes no difference.

"It didn't have an effect upon us," she said Friday.

Visitors who drive in Florida still must have a valid license from another U.S. state or territory or from their country of residence.

Harry Oberman, a retired telecommunications professional from Quebec who spends much of the winter in South Florida, said he worries that the law might still be enforced as long as it's on the books. It's a concern being expressed by fellow Canadians, he said in an interview from Hallandale Beach. A news story from a publication in Canada alerted him to the law this week.

"I was worried, the truth be said," Oberman said. "Because I'm a very lawful guy."

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