

New state laws take hard line on violators

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TALLAHASSEE — Floridians and others will pay a higher price for their transgressions under a pair of state laws that took effect over the weekend.

For example, drivers who choose to participate in one of Florida's seemingly most popular vehicular sports will see the cost of their impatience more than double.

As of Oct. 1, the fine for running a red light increased from \$60 to \$125 for most Florida motorists. The increased fee is being imposed under a measure sponsored by Sen. Burt Saunders, R-Naples, to boost funding for Florida's struggling trauma centers.

The increased fines are going to benefit Florida's 20 trauma centers, which lose an estimated \$100 million a year treating uninsured and indigent patients. Officials from Lee Memorial Hospital in Fort Myers, one of the facilities that would benefit from the new law, say they lose \$10 million a year.

The fines are estimated to bring in about \$15 million a year.

In order to break even on the minute you save getting from your home to work if you get caught, you'd have to be making \$7,500 an hour. I don't think even freelance journalists make that kind of cash.

A second law now in effect may have more dire consequences. Earlier this year, Gov. Jeb Bush signed into law a provision that allows people to kill in self-defense without first trying to flee.

Like many states, Florida courts have ruled that homeowners have a right to defend themselves in their homes. State courts have expanded the doctrine to include employees in their workplace and drivers who are attacked in their automobiles.

The new law further expands that doctrine to include people in public places who feel threatened and could be subject to death or great bodily harm.

Critics of the law have few objections to allowing people to protect themselves in their homes but say it creates a "Wild West" mentality in public, where residents may shoot first and ask questions later.

Until now, Florida courts have ruled that most victims must at least attempt to escape before using deadly force, a provision gun advocates say puts victims at greater risk. The new law removes that requirement if a person has a reasonable fear of death or great bodily harm.

"All this bill will do is sell more guns and possibly turn Florida into the OK Corral," Rep. Irv Slosberg, a Democrat, said during debate on the bill.

Supporters, however, say the new law just allows citizens to protect themselves anywhere they feel in danger.

"To suggest that you can't defend yourself against a rapist, who's trying to drag you into an alley, or against a carjacker who's trying to drag you out of your car is nonsense," said Marion Hammer, a former president of the National Rifle Association, earlier this year in response to the bill's passage.

"The ability to protect yourself, your children or your spouse is important, no matter where you are."