

EDITORIAL: Apply brakes to add-on fees for minor traffic tickets

One of the hidden impacts of years of tight local government budgets in California was the creation of new fees tacked onto routine traffic citations to help finance parts of the criminal justice system. These surcharges can turn a minor ticket that carries a modest fine into a major expense that can break the bank for someone living paycheck to paycheck.

And if the offender fails to pay in full on time, for any reason, the fine not only increases again, but the person's driver's license is immediately suspended.

The result is that millions of low-income Californians have had their license suspended with no prospect of having it restored. Then they are faced with a difficult choice. If they drive without a license, they risk another ticket and harsher financial consequences. But if they refrain from driving, they find it difficult to hold a job. And without a job, they not only are condemned to poverty, but they will also never be able to pay the fine that contributed to their downward spiral.

California isn't the only state where drivers are being soaked and worse by these surcharges. Something has to change. Gov. Jerry Brown has recognized this with a proposal for a traffic fine amnesty as a way to clear the books of an estimated \$10 billion in unpaid citations.

State Sen. Robert Hertzberg, D-Van Nuys, meanwhile, has a proposal that would go further, providing a way for drivers whose privileges were suspended for a nonviolent offense, like driving with a broken taillight or expired registration tag, to restore their license while they pay what they owe.

Hertzberg notes that a \$100 ticket for a minor violation automatically becomes a \$490 fine thanks to fees and surcharges tacked on by the state and local governments. But if the offender misses just one court date, that fine could increase to \$815, and the driver would lose his or her license.

Hertzberg says 4.2 million Californians had their license suspended between 2006 and 2013 and only 71,000 had it restored.

A recent study in New Jersey found that 42% of drivers who lost their license in that state also lost their job, and of them, nearly half were unable to find new employment. Nearly 90% of those who had their license suspended reported a loss of income, even counting those who were able to keep their job.

The state needs to tread cautiously lest it remove incentives for offenders to pay fines, or, even worse, follow traffic laws. But the kind of measured response Hertzberg is proposing in Senate Bill 405 seems to strike the right balance between expecting personal responsibility while still exercising compassion and common sense.

If this results in more drivers having a license and more fines being paid to local governments, the law would be a victory for motorists and taxpayers alike.