

Bill would impose more stringent tow penalties

*Laggards could
lose vehicles within
30 days*

By LAURA A. BISCHOFF
lbischoff@DaytonDailyNews.com

COLUMBUS — Beware of where you park or you might end up losing your car if pending legislation becomes state law.

A bill before the legislature would give towing companies the power to take title to cars and invalidate any liens held against the vehicles if the owners fail to pay towing fees within 25 business days.

Aside from losing their cars, the owners would be blocked from registering other vehicles in Ohio

until they paid the fees, or for up to five years, whichever comes first, according to the bill. Still, the owners would be responsible for making car payments.

The bill is scheduled to be voted out of the Senate Highways and Transportation Committee today. But the bill's sponsor, state Sen. Jeff Armbruster, R-North Ridgeway, said it might be amended today and a vote could be doubtful.

The Association of Chiefs of Police opposes the bill, calling it harsh and unconscionable. Association lobbyist John Gilchrist said police departments already receive numerous complaints about towing companies piling on charges and making it difficult for motorists to retrieve their cars. State law changed in recent years so that local municipalities cannot

regulate towing companies, leaving them to set their charges in many instances, he said.

Armbruster said his office worked with a towing industry lobbyist to write the bill.

Private towing companies complain that their lots end up with more lower-value cars that are more likely to be abandoned or not immediately claimed than do city-owned impound lots, Armbruster said. The bill aims to address that trend, he said.

The bill includes due process so that owners are notified of the charges and have a chance to pay them, he said. But the legislation would mean people could lose title to their cars much more quickly than they can now, he acknowledged.

Currently, it's a difficult and

complicated process for a towing company to obtain title to abandoned cars, said Katie Kuhns, Armbruster's legislative aide.

Under the bill, towing companies would have five business days to notify the owner and lienholder that they had 20 business days to pay the charges and claim the car. If within 30 days of it being towed no one pays the fees and police haven't announced they want jurisdiction over the car, the towing company can get the title through the county clerk of courts. If the car is worth more than \$6,000, a second notice must be sent to the owner and lienholder before getting the title.

Gilchrist said many towed cars go unclaimed now because the owners can't scrape up enough money to cover the fees.