

ONE-STOP RENEWAL FOR DRIVERS

Licensing-insurance merger chugs ahead

By Mary Agnes Welch

AFTER a few speed bumps — especially in Portage la Prairie — the provincewide merger of the driver's licensing and insurance-renewal systems has hit high gear.

"It was very tough on our staff for the first few weeks," said Tony Taronno, chairman and past-president of the Insurance Brokers Association of Manitoba. "But we recognize in the long term it's an advantage to the consumer and to us because we get more customers through our doors."

Manitoba Public Insurance is about two months into the creation of a one-stop-shopping system that will let drivers renew their licences and their Autopac insurance in one fell swoop.

That will replace the confusing system where licences expire at the end of a driver's birth month, and insurance expires four months later, requiring two separate batches of paperwork and visits to two different offices.

But the transition to the one-stop-shop system will take most of this year and has been a little bumpy.

There were delays, computer glitch-

es and frustrated drivers stuck in long lines as staff coped with new technology, said MPI spokesman Brian Smiley. But he said the transition is running "90 per cent smoothly" now.

Some of the delays were caused by problems merging two databases — the licence information with the insurance information. If there's a discrepancy between the two — say a name is listed slightly differently — a new round of paperwork is needed to correct the problem.

Hardest hit is Portage la Prairie, where the drivers' licences aren't big enough to accommodate the full spelling of the town's name. It reads "Portage l Prairie" on licences but the full name appears in MPI's databases.

Fixing that problem means the licence-renewal process takes two to three times longer than it normally would, said one insurance broker in Portage.

The switch began in earnest in November, when the first wave of drivers renewed their licences. Instead of languishing in line at one of the driver

licensing offices — there are only six in Winnipeg — drivers could stop by any one of hundreds of insurance brokers scattered around the province.

In the next couple of months, the second phase of the transition will begin. That's when people with new driver's licences will be summoned to their Autopac broker to renew their insurance, just like normal. At that time, they'll also renew their driver's licences, even though they're only four months old. That will make both their licence and their Autopac due on the same date from then on.

Driver Greg Lajoie said he stopped by his insurance broker's office to renew his licence but had an outstanding fine to pay first at the downtown courthouse. Then he had to visit the driver licensing office on Portage Avenue to get his licence renewed the old-fashioned way.

"That's a lot of trips for a guy without a licence," quipped Lajoie, who was being ferried around by a friend.

Despite the hassle, he said it makes sense to merge the two processes so drivers can get a licence and their insurance in one visit.

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Greg Lajoie

How it will affect you

I've got to renew my driver's licence pretty soon. What's new?

Three big things:

■ If you miss the deadline for renewing by mail, you can get your licence renewed at your insurance broker's office, not just at one of the six driver licensing offices around Winnipeg. Those offices were often plagued by long line-ups, especially at the end of the month when procrastinators rushed out to renew their licences. Now, instead of just six locations, there are something like 150 Autopac brokerages in the city that can issue you a new licence.

■ If it's been four years since you got your photo taken, you'll be one of the lucky ones to get a new plastic photo card. It's got a bunch of new security features and replaces the old photo cards that look like they were laminated in some guy's basement. If you don't need a new picture, you won't get a new photo card until you renew your insurance in four months. Keep reading for more on that.

■ It'll be cheaper, but just for a while. Instead of roughly \$65, it will be more

like \$10. That's because you're only paying for a kind of temporary licence valid for four months. When you renew your insurance in four months, you'll also renew your licence. That way both will come due on the same date next year.

That's two trips to the same place in one year and two licence renewals. That's annoying.

It's no different than past years where two trips were often necessary — one for a new licence and one for new Autopac. Next year, when you renew, you'll only have to make one visit to one office — your local Autopac broker.

Do I get a new photo card right away?

Only if you are a brand-new driver or if it's time to get a new photo. Drivers generally need to update their pictures every four years. If you don't get a photo when you renew your licence, you'll get one in four months when you renew both your licence and insurance. Also, the cards come in the mail, which takes a week or so. And you still have the paper part, but it's smaller so it fits on your wallet better.

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