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Orlando wants to crack down on gas gougers near airport

By Mark Schlueb, ORLANDO SENTINEL

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City Hall wants to crack down on gas stations near Orlando International Airport that gouge tourists who top off their tanks before returning their rental cars.

"There are a lot of people who said, 'I had the best vacation in America, but I left with a bad taste in my mouth because I was scammed by these gas stations,' " Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer said Monday.

At least two gas stations — the two closest to the airport and rental car return lots — routinely charge rates nearly double the average. But unlike most area gas stations, they have no prices posted on signs visible from the road but instead disclose prices only on the gas pump, as required by law.

On Monday, Suncoast Energys, just north of the airport, was charging \$4.89 for a gallon of regular unleaded. At stations a mile further north, the price ranged from \$2.72 to \$2.79.

"If I wasn't in a rush to catch a plane, I wouldn't pay it," said Gil Cabanas, a New Yorker who was ending a family vacation by gassing up at Suncoast. He didn't notice the price until the gas was already flowing into his rental car.

"I thought the prices were high in Manhattan, but this is crazy. First the Mouse robs you, then they rob you," he said.

Next week, Dyer will ask the City Council to approve an ordinance that would force



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gas stations in an area around the airport to post prices on large signs in front of the business, to make it easier for consumers to comparison shop. It's common practice in most places and even the law in some states, though Florida isn't one of them.

"We're not saying they can't charge \$4.89 a gallon, just that they can't hide it," Dyer said.

Gas stations that don't comply face a \$500-a-day fine.

A representative of Suncoast Energys, the station that's earned a notorious reputation for pricing over the past few years, did not return a call seeking comment. The owner of a Shell station across the street that opened recently with comparable prices could not be reached.

The city receives several complaints a month from tourists, as do local tourism agencies. City officials typically refer the complaints to the Florida Attorney General, but that agency is just as powerless to act.

Florida has a law that prevents price-gouging in an emergency like a hurricane, but it applies only to prices that "grossly exceed" those charged in the previous 30 days. The stations near the Orlando airport maintain high prices all the time, so the law doesn't apply.

Assistant City Attorney Kyle Shephard said Orlando officials have been considering regulations for some time, but couldn't find any comparable ordinances elsewhere. Orlando's proposed regulation is apparently the first of its kind in Florida.

"It's taken quite a bit of homework and research," Shephard said.

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More on gas prices and stations near the airport:

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