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Put your story on your bumper

Delaware offers 87 variations -- from environment to alumni groups

By *SUMMER HARLOW*
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Delaware's environmental license plates with a lighthouse and duck aren't exactly attractive to Ed Lewandowski.

After all, he said, it's not like a mallard symbolizes the organizations the specialty plates support -- the Center for the Inland Bays and the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary.

"Maybe it should be a horseshoe crab; that's our logo," said Lewandowski, executive director of the Inland Bays center. "I don't have one of these plates. No one on staff does. I think that's why there's interest in redesigning it. If it was a horseshoe crab, or something reflective of the organization, I think we'd all have one."

For Delawareans bored with the standard blue-and-yellow plates, or unable to afford a coveted low-digit black-and-white tag, the First State offers a whopping 87 specialty and organizational plates, such as the environmental ones, to give drivers a way to personalize their vehicles without coming up with a clever vanity tag.

"Everyone's got a story to tell, but most people think they don't have a platform to tell their story or get their message across," said Stefan Lonce, author of the forthcoming book "License to Roam: Vanity License Plates and the Stories They Tell." "But guess what? Everyone does, and it's the bumper of your car."

And the number of plates to choose from keeps increasing. That despite the fact the specialty and organizational plates appeal to a relatively small number of Delaware drivers: 6 percent, or about 52,000 of the state's 850,000 registered vehicles, have such tags, according to the Delaware Department of Transportation.

Last month, the governor approved more than half-dozen new plates, such as for veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Vietnam War, close relatives of military service members killed in action, and members of the Buffalo Soldiers Motorcycle Club of Delaware.

Already, there are organizational tags for alumni of the University of Delaware, Delaware State University and Goldey-Beacom College. Even graduates from as far away as Purdue University, Ohio State University and the University of Michigan can get a Delaware tag that features their school's name and insignia.

All it takes to get a high school or university alumni association plate is 25 applicants willing to pay the one-time \$10 fee on top of the regular vehicle registration fee.

Nonprofit organizations can get their own plate with 200 applications.

Delaware Senior Olympics has its own organizational plate available to members, executive director Conny Wertz said.

She's not sure how many people have purchased the plates, but it's been a while since any have

been sold. As such, this summer the group is planning a fundraiser, selling the plates for \$50.

"Every year, we have a new group of athletes that turn 50, so I think a lot of people might be excited to put one of these license plates on their car," Wertz said.

The tags not only "show support for our athletes," but "bring awareness to the organization," she said.

The most popular of the specialty choices is the environmental plate with the lighthouse: 5,935 cars have those tags.

A portion of the cost of each of the four specialty plates goes toward a corresponding organization. An animal welfare group gets \$35 from the sale of each plate sporting a picture of a dog and cat. The Delaware Farmland Preservation Fund also gets \$35 per plate, and the Inland Bays group gets \$20 from its two plates, DeIDOT spokesman Mike Williams said.

The agriculture preservation plate, a scene of a farm at sunset, brings the preservation fund about \$1,500 to \$2,000 a month, said Michael McGrath, chief of planning for the Delaware Department of Agriculture.

"It's certainly distinctive for a Delaware tag, and I think that's what people like," McGrath said. "And it supports a cause they're interested in."

The plates aren't a major revenue source, but every penny counts, especially in this economy, he said.

"With the price of real estate what it is, we've only preserved a few acres of land with that money, but it gives people the sense they're directly participating in saving farmland for the future," McGrath said.

The Inland Bays plates generate \$8,000 to \$9,000 a year, Lewandowski said. That amount has been decreasing over the years, which is why there's talk of redesigning the plate to better compete with all the other options out there, he said.

Concerned about the proliferation of specialty tags, some states have placed moratoriums on the introduction of new plates. Police also have worried that so many varied plates makes it difficult to know which tags are legitimate.

But in Delaware, at least, that's not a problem, said Delaware State Police Cpl. Jeff Whitmarsh.

"If anything, it helps us more because it stands out," he said.

The six percent of drivers choosing to affix specialty or organizational plates to their vehicles doesn't necessarily include all the people who have opted for vanity plates, where they pick the letters on their tag.

Delaware ranks 36th in the nation, with about 2.4 percent of vehicles boasting vanity plates, said Jason King of the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators. In the United States, about 9.3 million cars sport vanity tags.

"People are so passionate about their own personal story they're willing to pay the state their own money to tell their story in eight characters or less," he said.

Lonce, the author, said he doesn't like the term "vanity" plate.

"The general public tends to dismiss vanity plates as vain, or cute or droll," Lonce said. "But these are stories rolling down the street in front of you."