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Moe: Here's a book idea: Banned by the DOT

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Stefan Lonce, the nation's leading expert on vanity license plates, wrote a column in The New York Times over the weekend calling for a national database of prohibited automobile license plates -- vanity plates with an offensive message.

"A national database of prohibited vanity plate messages," Lonce wrote, "created with advice from First Amendment experts and open to public scrutiny, would help alleviate some of the problems of defining what 's offensive."

You might think offensive license plates would rank pretty low on the list of things to worry about these days, but in fact Wisconsin residents are notorious for taking umbrage at their neighbors' automobile license plates, and filing complaints.

A prominent Web site, www.thesmokinggun.com, once observed: "What could possibly motivate these snitches to try and stifle artistic expression? It's time to change the Wisconsin state bird from the robin to the canary."

I have made a hobby of collecting Wisconsin vanity license plate lore over the years and have interviewed Lonce, who is writing a book titled, "LCNS2ROM -- License to Roam: Vanity Plates and the Stories They Tell."

When I spoke with Lonce last year, he had just written an article for Move, the magazine of the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA), on the history of vanity license plates. They were first introduced in Pennsylvania in 1931, and could contain nothing beyond the vehicle owner's initials. Connecticut came next a few years later, allowing up to four characters, and now every state uses them as a revenue stream.

A recent AAMVA survey placed Wisconsin 11th among the 50 states in the penetration rate of personalized plates, which are on 5.4 percent of all licensed vehicles in the state. Our fee for the vanity plate -- \$15 extra -- is cheap compared with others such as Minnesota (\$100) and Texas (\$40).

The first I know of a Wisconsin license plate creating a controversy occurred in Superior in 2001. A car collector there bought an old hearse and put on a plate that read, 1 ON ICE. Funeral home owners were outraged and it may have been the resulting publicity that led the Smoking Gun to file an open-records request with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation for vanity license complaints.

Smoking Gun put a dozen or so letters up on its site, one of which concerned a plate I used to see around Madison: IH8GOP.

The letter read: "My reason for requesting the recall of this plate is that the message is obscene to those of us who are members of the Republican Party (GOP) and who subscribe to the conservative principles of the party."

DOT's strategy for catching potentially offensive vanity plates has become more sophisticated over the years. In 2001 a reporter noted that the department relied on "a red binder containing 230 pages of single-spaced words and sayings that will never breathe carbon monoxide in Wisconsin."

A report earlier this year said the state now has computer software that has caught and banned some 8,000 letter combinations, including SEXVAN and KSMYBT.

There is no denying that the plates can make people angry. In his column in Saturday's New York Times, Lonce noted that the Senate in South Dakota recently rejected a bill that would have abolished vanity plates altogether. That controversy erupted over a plate, MPEACHW, that the state's DOT ruled was allowable.

Lonce, an engaging fellow who told me he's been fascinated by vanity plates "since God was a boy," would rather concentrate on their less controversial aspects. They're creative and fun, he says. Lonce calls vanity plates "minimalist poetry in motion."

Lonce's idea for a national database of prohibited plates has good intentions, but it seems to me it has an inherent problem: What's offensive to someone in Wisconsin might not be offensive to someone in Illinois, and vice-versa.

Come to think of it, sometimes just seeing an Illinois plate is enough to rile a Wisconsin resident, even if the plate doesn't contain a message.

There is also something to be said for the discretion of the state-to-state individual administrators. In 2003, an administrator in the Wisconsin DOT was interviewed by the Wisconsin State Journal and listed a few banned plates, including GETNAKD and 4NACATE. But another questionable plate, PRNOSTR, was allowed in Wisconsin.

The administrator explained: "If someone wants to tell the world they're a porno star, that's OK."

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