

WHAT DO SOUTH CAROLINIANS BELIEVE ABOUT LICENSE PL8S?

By Stefan Lonce

I believe that South Carolina has a problem with license plates.

The General Assembly just passed S. 1392, authorizing new special license plates, which have distinct designs and promote organizations or causes. The bill authorizes a plate that would say "Coon Hunters," which often would be misinterpreted as a slang racial slur, instead of an enthusiasm for raccoon hunting.

The South Carolina Coon Hunters Association, which sponsored the plate and would receive part of the fee, refused to change it to say, "Raccoon Hunters," which would have solved the problem.

The "Coon Hunters" plate is even worse than the "I Believe" plate, with an image of a cross, which a federal judge ruled was an unconstitutional "endorsement" of Christianity. The court ordered the DMV and the Department of Corrections to pay the Plaintiffs' attorneys' fees of \$202,000, even though those agencies were not involved with the plate until the General Assembly had unanimously approved it, and Gov. Mark Sanford had let it to become law without his signature.

I, and other observers, predicted two years ago that South Carolina would be sued, and could easily lose, if it issued the "I Believe" plate. I agree with Ayesha Kahn, an attorney for the Plaintiffs, who said, "I wish we could make the General Assembly pay the Plaintiffs' attorneys' fees [instead of] agencies that aren't at fault."

I think that South Carolina would be sued, and could easily lose in court, again, if it issues the "Coon Hunters" plate.

Another problem is that S.1392 authorizes many new special plates, including plates for high schools. This would dramatically increase the 127 different special plates that South Carolina issues, many of which are hard-to-read. Moreover, the fiscally-distressed Palmetto State can no longer afford to share special plate fees with the organizations that sponsor the plates.

That's why Gov. Sanford should veto S.1392 (he has until midnight on June 26th to act on it).

South Carolina could end its too-many-special-plates problem by issuing only one new plate each year, which South Carolinians would choose in an online vote, as they chose the design of the current standard plate. South Carolina could end fee-sharing by allowing only state entities to sponsor new plates.

South Carolina should also promote personalized ["vanity"] plates... because it needs the money. South Carolinians have "vanitized" only about 45,000 motor vehicles, ranking the state 45th in vanity plates.

The DMV, understandably, does not promote vanity plates: the \$30 vanity plate fee that motorists pay every two years goes to the General Fund, not the DMV. Accordingly, the General Assembly should raise the vanity plate fee for *new plates* to \$40, and allow the DMV to keep \$10 to help it serve South Carolinians even better than it does now.

South Carolina could dramatically increase its income from vanity plates if the DMV were given a vanity plates marketing budget, if DMV personnel would ask motorists if they'd like to vanitize when performing other transactions, if DMV offices would display posters and distribute brochures promoting vanity plates, and if special plates could be vanitized.

The DMV should also allow motorists to order vanity plates online, as 19 DMVs do, and increase demand for vanity plates by holding online contests, twice each year, for the funniest, most compelling or other categories of vanity plates; winners would get free plates.

Vanity plates empower South Carolinians to tell the shortest of stories, or promote causes, in seven or fewer characters. Vanity plates are minimalist poetry in motion, and could be far more lucrative for South Carolina than they are now.

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