

FAQ + A

ABOUT CA VANITY PLATES

By STEFAN LONCE

Here are some frequently asked questions, with answers, about California vanity license plates.

Q: What, exactly, is a "vanity license plate" and what is a "special license plate"?

A: "A vanity license plate has a motorists' message. Special license plates have distinct designs and promote organizations or causes, which the additional plate fees. California offers 11 special plates, including the **Arts** plate sponsored by the California Arts Commission, a state agency, to fund arts programs. CA allows special plates to be ['vanitized'](#) with motorists' messages."

Q: Why are California's personalized ["vanity"] license plates called "Environmental License Plates"?

A: "California's law authorizing the DMV to issue vanity plates, which Ronald Reagan supported and signed into law on August 21, 1970, provides that the fees that motorists pay for vanity plates are paid to a state fund that fights pollution. This clever idea – use the extra fees that motorists *voluntarily* pay for vanity plates, which are affixed to pollution-spewing motor vehicles, to fight pollution – was one of Ronald Reagan's greatest, yet least known, achievements."

Q: What does CA allow on vanity plates?

A: "California allows up to 7 characters, and 1 space, on [vanitized](#) standard plates, and allows up to 6 characters on [vanitized](#) special plates. (Motorists who order the **Kids** special plate may also use one of four special symbols on their plates, including ♥ + ☆). Although the First Amendment's right to freedom of speech applies to license plates, DMVs may legally refuse to issue vanity plates that are profane, obscene, derogatory to particular groups, or that advocate violence or illegal activities."

Q: How much do vanity plates cost in California?

A: "The CA DMV charges \$49 for the first year that a motorist has a vanity plate, and \$38/year thereafter. There are additional fees for special plates."

Q: How many registered motor vehicles in California are [vanitized](#)?

A: "According to the CA DMV, in July 2010, Californians had **vanitized** 1,030,000 motor vehicles, down from the 1,136,000 **vanitized** motor vehicles that California's DMV reported in the *American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators – LCNS2ROM [LICENSE TO ROAM] Vanity License Plates Survey*, in 2007."

Q: How can California motorists order vanity and special plates?

A: "Californians can order vanity and special plates on the CA DMV web site (www.dmv.ca.gov), or by completing and mailing a form available online and at DMV offices. The plates may be ordered as gifts."

Q: What does CA do to promote vanity plates, to *earn more money for pollution abatement*?

A: "Other than allowing motorists to order vanity plates on its well-designed and easy-to-use web site (www.dmv.ca.gov), the CA DMV does not promote vanity plates. Governor Reagan, however, extensively promoted vanity plates, starting on October 26, 1970, when, standing in front of an enlarged vanity plate that said **CLEAN**, Gov. Reagan held a drawing for some of the most popular vanity plate messages (#1: **PEACE**), and personally presented the first plate, which said **AMIGO**, to the motorist who had ordered it.

"Gov. Reagan's promotional publicity produced profits: vanity plates were the 'cool' XMAS GIFTS in Southern California in 1970.

"In 1971, Gov. Reagan continued to promote vanity plates: in a June 24th press release, he said, 'California's Personalized License Plate Program ... has produc[ed] ... revenues for special projects designed to protect our environment.... and the promise of continuing success, is most heartening.'

"In a March 4, 1972 press release, Gov. Reagan said, '[T]he sales of California's personalized license plates, which support ecology programs, have increased more than 50 percent during the past four months. [R]evenue [is] being used ... for a variety of environmental protection programs that range from improving scenic vistas along roadside stops to the preservation of wildlife reserves and endangered groves of trees.'

"On March 6, 1973, Gov. Reagan presented a 'certificate of appreciation' to the Californian who ordered vanity plate No. 100,000."

[Copies of some of the original Reagan documents about vanity plates, provided by the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and by the California State Archives, are posted on the "Historical Reagan Documents" page, which can be accessed by clicking on that link on the drop down menu on the California Vanity PL8S button.]