



LICENSE TO ROAM:

VANITY LICENSE PLATES AND THE GR8 STORIES THEY TELL™
www.VanityPlatesBook.com

35 Brook Street • Croton-on-Hudson, NY 10520
914-629-4580 • fax: 914-271-6712
stefanlance@LCNS2ROM.com

June 17, 2010

Hon. Mark Sanford
1100 Gervais Street
Columbia, SC 29201

Dear Governor Sanford:

I urge you to veto S.1392, because it authorizes a new special license plate that would say, "**COON HUNTERS**," which many observers would misinterpret as a slang racial slur, instead of a reference to raccoon hunting, especially outside of South Carolina. The South Carolina Coon Hunters Association reportedly refused to change the plate to say "**RACCOON HUNTERS**," which would have made the plate unobjectionable.

I care about license plates: I am working on a book about vanity [personalized] license plates because vanity plates empower individual motorists to tell GR8 stories, like this one, "Allison Masry celebrated her donation of a kidney to her husband, Rudolph, who suffered from end-stage renal failure, with a vanity plate that says, **DONOR**; Rudy's plate says **DONEE**."

Special plates, which have distinct designs and promote organizations or causes, empower groups to express themselves. The South Carolina DMV offers 127 different special plates on its web site.

Here's why I think you should veto S.1392:

- The **COON HUNTERS** plate will offend a lot of people, throughout the United States and Canada: license plates are, after all, extremely mobile. (S.1392 allows any South Carolina motorist, not just Coon Hunter Association members, to order a **COON HUNTERS** plate, so the DMV may issue many of the plates).

- It's virtually certain that South Carolina would be sued if it issues the **COON HUNTERS** plate, and could easily lose in court, as it lost the litigation over the first **CHOOSE LIFE** plate and the **I BELIEVE** plate. A loss in court would mean that the DMV and the Department of Corrections would have to pay the Plaintiffs' attorneys fees (in the **I BELIEVE** plate case, Judge Cameron Currie has ordered the DMV and DOC to pay the Plaintiffs' attorneys' fees).

- South Carolina already issues too many hard-to-read special plates, and can no longer afford to share special plate fees with plate sponsors. S.1392 authorizes special plates for high schools, which could dramatically increase the number of special plates issued by the SC DMV. The General Assembly can solve these problems by mandating that only state entities may sponsor new special plates, that only one new special plate be issued each year, and that South Carolinians choose each year's new special plate in an online vote.

You deserve credit for allowing South Carolinians to choose the current standard license plate design in an online vote. It was a GR8 idea to let South Carolinians choose the design of the standard license plate, which is the most ubiquitous image issued by a state, seen thousands of times each day by almost everyone, but rarely noticed.

Here's another GR8 idea: the SC DMV should promote personalized ["vanity"] plates... because South Carolina needs the money. South Carolinians have "vanitized" only about 45,000 motor vehicles, ranking the state 45th in the *Vanity License Plates Survey*, which I co-authored with the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators in 2007.

The DMV, understandably, does not promote vanity plates: the \$30 fee that motorists pay every two years for a vanity plate 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 would allow motorists to order vanity plates online, as 19 DMVs do;
- If the DMV were given a vanity plates marketing budget;
- If DMV personnel were trained to ask motorists if they'd like to "vanitize" when performing other transactions;
- If DMV offices would display posters and distribute brochures promoting vanity plates;
- If the DMV would increase demand for vanity plates by holding online contests, twice each year, for the funniest, most compelling or other categories of vanity plates, with contest winners getting free vanity plates for two years;
- If the DMV would change its rules to allow special plates to be "vanitized" with motorists' messages; and
- If the DMV were to offer vanity plate gift certificates.

If you embrace the opportunity in South Carolina's current fiscal adversity, you could find more creative ways for South Carolina to generate greater income from vanity and special license plates. Wouldn't that be GR8?

SNCRLY,



Stefan Lonce



Posted on Sat, May. 31, 2008

What does Sanford believe about license plates?

By STEFAN LONCE
Guest Columnist

License plates are more than mere vehicle identifiers: They reflect our values and our political beliefs. South Carolinians will soon learn how controversial religious messages on license plates can be.

On May 22, the General Assembly unanimously passed a bill authorizing a Christian special license plate, which would have images of a cross and a church stained glass window and the slogan "I Believe." There would be no extra fee for the "I Believe" plate if Gov. Mark Sanford signs the bill into law.

The American Jewish Congress, which strongly advocates separation of religion and state, has urged Gov. Sanford to veto the bill.

Like death and taxes, it's a certainty that South Carolina would be sued if it issues the "I Believe" plate. The plate would apparently be the first U.S. license plate with explicitly religious images (other than university logos that incorporate religious symbols). South Carolina is the only state that lost a lawsuit over the "Choose Life" special license plates, which have an explicitly pro-life, anti-abortion message.

Special license plates honor universities, sports teams, regions, professions, the military and causes. Although motorists would have to request the "I Believe" plate, a court could find that it implies that the state is endorsing a particular religion, and violates the First Amendment.

Vanity plates with religious messages are frequently controversial. Vermont prohibits all religious messages on vanity plates; a motorist sued when the Vermont DMV refused to issue him a vanity plate that says "JN36NT" — a reference to a New Testament passage. The motorist is appealing a federal judge's dismissal of his lawsuit.

I think that there's a distinction between a vanity plate with a religious message — which is clearly the motorist's message — and a religious special license plate. I respect the strongly held beliefs of the sponsors of the "I Believe" plate, but to some people, the plate could imply that the state is endorsing a particular religion.

To be constitutional, South Carolina would have to allow other religions to apply for special license plates, and then state legislators would have to decide which religion would get which plate. What if different branches of the same religion apply for its special plate? South Carolina already issues a special plate honoring secular humanism — but is secular humanism a "religion"? Would atheists be entitled to a special plate that says "I Don't Believe"?

To close the state's budget deficit, the General Assembly cut spending, including for the Department of Corrections, which is running a \$4.3 million deficit this year. Legislators did not consider the potential costs of defending litigation over the "I Believe" plate, although members of the House Education and Public Works Committee were assured that it is constitutional. Still, the House amended the bill to strengthen the state's legal position in court.

Florida legislators, recognizing the "I Believe" plate's potential legal problems, did not pass it.

Gov. Sanford is famously frugal with taxpayer dollars, and should consider that the "I Believe" plate would raise no revenue, but would cost the state to defend in court. License plates reflect our values, and our politics.

Mr. Lonce is author of the forthcoming book LCNS2ROM — License to Roam: Vanity License Plates and the GR8 Stories They Tell (www.LCNS2ROM.com) and editor of the Montauk Sun in New York.

July 5, 2008

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Free Speech on Wheels

By STEFAN LONCE

Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.

THE latest license plate controversy erupted last month when the South Carolina Legislature passed America's first-ever religious specialty license plate, with the slogan "I believe" and the image of a cross over a stained-glass window. The plate is being challenged in court by a group that promotes the separation of church and state.

The challengers have a point. Specialty plates are approved by state legislators, so a message or slogan can easily be construed as an official endorsement. States shouldn't get out of the specialty plate business altogether. They are a huge source of state income. (For instance, in Nevada they brought in \$3.8 million last year.) But I don't think states should issue specialty plates with religious or political messages.

The good news is that an acceptable forum for this kind of self-expression already exists: vanity plates. And what's better, federal courts have consistently ruled that they are protected under the First Amendment.

But if we're going to let vanity plates flourish, we need to reform the way they are approved. Americans love these plates; 9.3 million motor vehicles have them, which puts a tremendous burden on motor vehicle departments that must screen all applications. Deciphering, evaluating and potentially rejecting a "vanitized" message because it could be construed as offensive places department officials in an awkward position. What we need is a database where requests can be logged and evaluated by experts.

A national database of prohibited vanity plate messages, created with advice from First Amendment experts and open to public scrutiny, would help alleviate some of the problems of defining what's offensive. The database could be created and maintained by the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators, which represents American motor vehicle departments. Motorists would be charged a small fee to cover the cost of the database, which department officials would consult when reviewing applications.

And it can't come soon enough. In January, the South Dakota Senate rejected a bill to abolish vanity plates. The proposal was motivated by an anti-Bush vanity plate that proclaimed MPEACHW. In New York, a vehicle owner is suing in federal court to force the state's Department of Motor Vehicles to reverse its decision to revoke his vanity plate, which says GETOSAMA. And in Vermont, a motorist who requested a plate that says JN36NT (a reference to a New Testament passage) is appealing a federal judge's decision upholding the state's prohibition against religious messages on vanity plates.

Very few vanity or, for that matter, specialty plates are controversial; most are just creative and fun. As long as we have a reliable method for deciding what's allowed and what isn't, I say the more, the merrier.

Stefan Lonce, the editor of The Montauk Sun, is working on a book about vanity license plates.

timesunion.com

New York, thy fiscal solution is a vanity plate

By **STEFAN LONCE**

First published: Wednesday, November 25, 2009

Beginning next April Fool's Day, New Yorkers will have to pay \$25 for new license plates that we don't need, to help the state close its budget deficit.

Or maybe not. Gov. David Paterson now says that he will scrap the new plate and fee if the Legislature finds another way to replace the estimated \$129 million that they would generate in each of the next two fiscal years.

The new plate proposal is another example of New York's budgetary gimmicks. According to police and the manufacturer of the mobile license plate readers that most New York police departments use, our current license plate is perfectly legible and doesn't need to be replaced.

Moreover, New York now has one of the best-designed license plates in the United States. Its blue and white colors enhance its legibility, and its Niagara Falls-to-New York City graphic is a pop art classic.

The proposed new plate, with its garish combination of blue and gold, is ugly -- and expensive.

We don't know how much it would cost the state to manufacture and distribute new plates for 12 million registered motor vehicles.

And making 24 million license plates (front and rear plates for each vehicle) will consume energy and degrade the environment.

The planned plate replacement is the worst idea for financing state government since Gov. Mario Cuomo sold Attica prison to a state authority to paper over a budget deficit.

Here's a better way for the state to raise revenues: Sell more vanity plates.

Americans have "vanitized" 9.3 million motor vehicles; New Yorkers have vanitized 264,000 motor vehicles. They ranks 35th among the states.

New Yorkers pay \$31.25 a year for vanity plates, and a \$50 application fee, earning the state about \$8.25 million annually -- not counting the application fee revenue.

The state could sell more vanity plates if the state Department of Motor Vehicle would ask New Yorkers if they wanted them. Virginia increased vanity plate sales by one-third

this way.

The DMV Web site's home page should be redesigned to include a more prominent direct link to the personalized plates order page.

And the DMV should hold monthly and annual online contests for the funniest, cleverest and most compelling vanity plates. Winners could get free vanity plates.

Vanity plates empower New York motorists to tell the shortest of stories, or to promote causes -- including themselves -- in eight or fewer characters.

Vanity plates are fascinating and fun -- and lucrative for states.

Instead of forcing New Yorkers to buy an ugly new license plate that we don't need, Paterson should stimulate New Yorkers' creativity by promoting vanity plates.

Stefan Lonce of Croton-on-Hudson is the editor of the Montauk Sun, a free, monthly newspaper distributed on the eastern end of Long Island. He was co-author of the American Association Of Motor Vehicle Administrators' LCNS2ROM (License to Roam) Vanity License Plates Survey and is writing a book, "LCNS2ROM -- License to Roam: Vanity License Plates and the GR8 Stories They Tell" (<http://www.vanityplatesbook.com>).

BEVAIN: Taking causes, messages to cars with plate talk

Stefan Lonce

They are almost everywhere in the Lower Hudson Valley and beyond, wherever there are motor vehicles. They tell the shortest of stories, or promote causes, in eight or fewer characters. They are minimalist poetry in motion. They are great conversation-starters that can turn strangers into neighbors, and neighbors into friends.

"They" are vanity license plates, and they are very popular: there are 9.3 million "vanitized" motor vehicles in the United States, about 4 percent of registered motor vehicles. I worked with officials from the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators, which represents the American and Canadian DMVs, to conduct the first-ever vanity license plates survey.

New Yorkers have vanitized about 287,000 vehicles (2.4 percent of registered vehicles); New York ranks 35th of 51 jurisdictions in the survey. The New York DMV allows eight characters on vanity plates, and charges an ex-

tra \$25 each year for the plates (plus a \$43 application fee).

Vanity plates empower motorists to express themselves. Hudson Valley motorists have vanitized with many clever, celebratory, and sometime cryptic plates that are intriguing conversation-starters. For example, Alison Masry and her husband Rudolph, from Briarcliff Manor, are often asked about their complementary "DONOR" and "DONEE" vanity plates, which celebrate Ally's donation of a kidney to Rudy, who suffered from end-stage renal failure.

Jay Siegel, from Wesley Hills, was a founding member of the Tokens, whose 1961 hit song was "The Lion Sleeps Tonight"; his vanity plate is the song's chorus, "WIMOWEH." The plate inspires some observers to sing ("In the jungle, the mighty jungle...").

Many Hudson Valley businesses have vanitized, enabling them to promote

themselves to thousands of people every day. York Lincousine in Millwood has vanitized with plates that say "YORK", Liller Bobcat Service in Hawthorne has vanitized its construction vehicles with "BOBCAT" plates; New Rochelle radio station WVOX proclaims its call letters on vanitized vehicles.

State regulations prohibit vanitized messages that are "obscene, lewd, lascivious, derogatory to a particular ethnic or other group, or patently offensive."

The U.S. Supreme Court has held that the First Amendment's right to freedom of speech applies to license plates. In 2007, Long Island motorist Arno Herwerth sued the DMV after the officials revoked his "GETOSAMA" vanity plate; they settled the case by allowing Herwerth to keep his plate, which encourages observers to talk with him about why Osama bin Laden is still apparently alive and free.

It's difficult for DMV officials to establish and apply screening rules that prohibit truly offensive vani-

tized messages, while allowing messages (such as GETOSAMA) that, although objectionable to some, are constitutionally protected. That's why I proposed the establishment of a national database of prohibited vanity plate messages, compiled with advice from First Amendment experts. AAMVA and DMV officials are considering how to implement the database.

Custom license plates are the first cousins of vanity plates. New York offers almost 250 different custom plates. The organizations that sponsor custom plates receive part of the fees that motorists pay (typically, a \$43 initial plate fee and a \$25 annual renewal fee, and \$25 more each year for vanitized plates).

Custom plates empower organizations, such as universities, sports teams and state agencies, to promote themselves or their causes. For example, the LOVE YOUR LIBRARY custom plate helps fund the state's library's statewide Summer Reading Program for children. The Masrys each have



Frank Becerra Jr./The Journal News
Jorge Beale Jr. displays the vanity plates on his 2003 Audi A4 in the parking lot of Kohls on Central Ave in Yonkers, June 17, 2004.

vanitized DONATE LIFE custom plates, which encourage organ donations.

Vanity plates are fascinating and fun. I encourage Journal News readers to scope out vanity plates and start conversations. Ask the motorists about the stories and the GR8 Stories They or causes that inspired them to vanitize. Wouldn't we all

get along better if we just talked to each other more?

The writer lives in Croton-on-Hudson. He is the author of the forthcoming book, "LCNS2ROM — License to Roam: Vanity License Plates and the GR8 Stories They Tell." Learn more at www.LCNS2ROM.com.