

It isn't easy being the DMV-er who has to screen vanity plate applications, or deal with complaints about already-issued vanity plates that some people find offensive. American and Canadian DMVs effectively regulate and manage almost 275 million registered motor vehicles, but it's not realistic to ask DMV-ers to decide which vanitized messages are constitutionally protected, and which aren't – especially since the U.S. Supreme Court often reverses its First Amendment rulings.

Therefore, in a *New York Times* op-ed article, I suggested that AAMVA establish a database of prohibited vanity plate messages, compiled with advice from First Amendment experts, and open to public scrutiny. I am now working with AAMVA-ites and DMV-ers to establish the vanitized database, which would make vanity plate screening more consistent -- and fairer to motorists.

Every vanity plate could potentially offend someone. Vanity plates with political or religious messages are frequently "offensive" to some, and controversial. In January 2008, the South Dakota Senate rejected a bill to abolish vanity plates; the bill was a reaction to a controversy over an anti-Bush vanity plate that said, **MPEACHW**. The South Dakota DMV had rescinded its revocation of the plate, because vanitized political messages are constitutionally protected.



Vermont prohibits all vanitized religious messages; a motorist who wanted a vanity plate that says **JN36TN**, a reference to a New Testament passage, is appealing a federal judge's decision upholding Vermont's vanity plate rules.



Specialty license plates are the first cousin of vanity plates; they promote sports teams, universities, professions, the military, organizations, and causes. In most states and provinces, specialty plates can be vanitized. The organizations that sponsor specialty plates usually receive some of the additional fees that motorists pay for the plates.