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Can any Pennsylvania group get a specialty license plate?

Dan Hartzell

The Road Warrior

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Q: I recently saw a 'Pro Life' themed license plate on a car while traveling the Lehigh Valley. Given this was a Pennsylvania-issued plate, I wonder what political, social and other issues are deemed OK for PA plates, and by whom. What's the process? Could any organization get a plate? Could the Ku Klux Klan get their own plate?

Mika Namir

Allentown

A: Apparently the white-hooded extremists haven't bothered to apply for specialty plates in Pennsylvania, Mika, at least not yet. And it's just as well, 'cause they'd be rejected: The KKK is not a registered nonprofit organization under the Internal Revenue Code's Section 501.



Only Section 501 organizations -- the most familiar being charities, religious and educational organizations filed under 501(c)(3) -- are eligible for specialty plates, also known as special organization plates.

That rule by itself should blow the engine on most trouble-making applicants one might imagine -- Neo-Nazi Skinheads of America, or Maoist League USA, to make two up out of thin air, from opposite sides of the political road. Groups must convince the IRS their activities promote public welfare or benefit the community in order to qualify.

In case unsavory motorists do manage to steer around the IRS roadblock, PennDOT imposes similar, possibly even stricter provisions: Eligible groups must provide community services that benefit the welfare of others, and must not be "offensive in purpose, nature, activity or name," as determined by PennDOT, said Motor Vehicles Director Anita Wasko.

State officials could use those vehicles to force hate groups off Specialty Plate Road, and presumably they would. But neither Wasko nor customer service officer Andy Cleaver would speculate on organizations that might apply.

"We don't know until they apply" whether groups meet the criteria, Cleaver said.

"I'm not going to go there with you," Wasko replied, regarding the KKK and license plates. "I can't go on what might happen in the future ... we're not going to theorize."

Any decision to reject an applicant would be made by Wasko, a deputy, a PennDOT lawyer and possibly others deemed appropriate, she said. In fact, she added, "Our legal counsel reviews every single one of these" applications.

Wasko and Cleaver said no organization has been rejected in their experience, but that dates back only three years. They're aware of no previous denials, though some groups begin but do not complete the application process, for various reasons.

The officials repeatedly said PennDOT's approach to applicants can be discerned from the basic considerations already discussed (and listed on PennDOT's Web site): They must be nonprofits registered in the state, contribute to the welfare of others, and be inoffensive in name and deed. (There's also a minimum 300-plate order, but it's negotiable.)

Provisions for specialty plates vary by state, said Jason King of the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators. In California, he said, a state agency must agree to co-sponsor the organization's application, and the minimum order is 7,500 plates.

Organization plates, and especially customized vanity plates (in some states, though not Pennsylvania, the two can be combined) are very popular, King said.

Nearly 10 million vanity license plates have taken to the road in the U.S., according to Stefan Lonce, editor of the Montauk (N.Y.) Sun, who's writing a book on the topic.

Pennsylvania had 84 different organization plates in January 2003, and there are 191 today, a growth rate of 20 per year. Choose-Life and Planned-Parenthood plates are newer models, arriving in showrooms in March 2007 and August 2007, respectively, said PennDOT spokesman Craig Yetter. There are 572 Choose-Life plates on the road, and 22 Planned-Parenthoods, he said.

PennDOT managed to steer clear of controversy, Mika, quietly issuing plates representing both sides of the contentious abortion issue. "Choose Life S.C." plates debuted in South Carolina just weeks ago, four years after a court rejected a similar anti-abortion theme there.

But one wonders if PennDOT would approve, say, "Sons of Confederate Veterans" plates. They're available in North Carolina, after the Sons won a court fight.

Or how about plates expressing Christian faith, like the model being introduced in South Carolina, displaying a cross, stained-glass window, and the words "I Believe"?

Gov. Mark Sanford on Thursday allowed a bill sanctioning the plates to become law without his signature, said spokesman Joel Sawyer, not because he opposes the plates in principle, but over complications regarding lack of a sponsoring organization.

Count on a court fight following faster than a Porsche 911 in a road race, Mika.

In a May 31 op-ed for The State newspaper in Columbia, S.C., Lonce said individuals should be free to express religious beliefs on vanity plates, but that organization plates could imply state endorsement of specific religions.

Christians might rejoice over standard license plates expressing their faith, but they should as readily accept Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or other plates.

In short, religious-expression plates come loaded down with baggage, and would best be left at the roadside. Unlike Sanford, Lonce does seem to oppose religious specialty plates on principle, to which the Warrior says, "Amen."

Road Warrior appears Mondays and Fridays. E-mail questions about roadways, traffic and transportation to hartzell@mcall.com. Please include your name and the municipality where you live. Or, write to Road Warrior, The Morning Call, 101 N. Sixth St., Allentown, PA 18101-1480.

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