



# TRANSPORTATION REVIEW

## MOTOR VEHICLE REGISTRATION AND LICENSE PLATES

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Updated August 2011

Motor vehicle registration and license plate issuance are of great interest to state and local governments, which are responsible for their implementation. This *Transportation Review* is intended to inform state legislators and others of recent activities and trends concerning noncommercial motor vehicle registration and license plates.

### OVERVIEW

This report is divided into two sections. The motor vehicle registration section analyzes recent registration fee changes and fee distribution requirements. This chart [www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=18014](http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=18014) provides registration and title fees for passenger vehicles, motorcycles and commercial vehicles for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Other topics, such as improper registration of vehicles in a neighboring state, are also briefly addressed. In addition, this review describes some newer and more innovative methods of registration renewal.

The second section provides an overview of specialty license plates, including their advantages and disadvantages. For a list of the number of specialty plates offered in all 50 states and the District of Columbia as well as other license plate information see [www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=18456](http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=18456). Other issues briefly discussed in this section include personalized plates, special plates for DUI offenders and sex offenders, and plates designed by interest groups. In addition, other license plate issues—such as the debate over requiring one or two plates per vehicle, general re-issuance of license plates, and limits on license plate frames and covers—are addressed.

### REGISTRATION FEE TRENDS

Vehicle registration systems keep track of the 255,917,664 vehicles that registered in the United States (as of 2008). All 50 states assess fees for motor vehicle registration. Distribution of these fees varies from state to state. A review of fee distribution shows that several states set aside a fixed amount of the fee to help pay for the cost of collection and administration of the registration program. In the 2011-2012 fiscal year, Texas projected that it would receive \$2.4 billion from motor vehicle registration fees. This money was divided between the counties (32 percent) and the state highway fund (68 percent).

Nebraska also sets statutory requirements for the distribution of registration fees, which are broken into three categories. First is the motor vehicle tax, which is paid for the vehicle's first 14 years. The local county treasurer receives 1 percent of the tax, after which 22 percent is distributed to the county's general fund, 60 percent is retained by the local school district, and 18 percent is allocated to the city where the driver resides. The separate motor vehicle fee is split between county and the municipality for highway improvements. The remaining \$15 registration fee is

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allocated to the state highway trust fund, the Emergency Medical Systems Operation Fund, the Department of Motor Vehicles, as well as the State Recreation Road Fund and other funds. Registration fees in other states are also used for road and highway maintenance.

Nebraska is not alone in allocating funds to emergency services. In 2003, Hawaii established an emergency medical services fund that allocated additional state vehicle registration fees for the Department of Health to operate the state's comprehensive emergency medical services system. Part of that program was to develop and train paramedics and to address recruitment and retention issues. States see other uses for the fees as well. In 2004, New Jersey increased its motor vehicle registration fees to cover capital and operational costs of the state's emergency helicopter program and to fund new state police trooper classes.

In 2009, California approved SB 83, which allows local transportation agencies to place on the ballot an initiative to charge extra fees to vehicle registration. These fees will then be used by the agencies to alleviate congestion. Other states allocate fees to services such as air quality improvement and driver education services. In 2010, 41 states used some of the revenue from motorcycle registration or license fees for motorcycle safety programs. Some of the other sources of funding were legislative appropriations, moving violation fines, and taxes on insurance purchases.

A growing trend in the states is to consider motor vehicle registration fees as a funding source for a variety of programs. In Florida, for example, people can add \$1 to their motor vehicle registration for organ and tissue donor education. Utah enacted a law in 2007 that creates a \$2 voluntary fee to help protect access to public lands by motor vehicle and off-highway vehicles and to educate the public about off-highway vehicle use. As a result of 2011 legislation in Maine, the registration fees for snowmobiles and ATVs pay for trail maintenance. A proposal in California during the 2009 legislative session would have used part of the vehicle registration fee to offset state park costs, making park entrance free for California residents. The measure failed to pass.

A few states have attempted to introduce environmentally friendly measures into their registration programs. Some of these measures would increase registration fees for fuel inefficient automobiles while others, conversely, would lower fees for efficient vehicles, hybrids and electric cars. In Washington, D.C., for example, cars that get at least 40 miles per gallon are eligible to receive discounted registration for two years and are exempt from an excise tax charged on the vehicle's title. Vehicles registered in Oregon with less than 7,500 miles on the odometer must comply with Oregon's low emission vehicle standard. Electric vehicles registered in Iowa are charged a flat-rate fee of \$25 rather than the normal fee which is based on the weight and original price of the vehicle.

During the 2011 legislative session, a few states introduced bills to change their registration fees. With tax revenues falling, registration fees are a way for states to increase revenue without increasing taxes. The California Legislature passed a bill to raise the registration fee to \$43 from \$31. Other states made minor increases. The Legislature in Hawaii enacted a law that raises the vehicle registration fee's flat-rate component as well as the per-pound fee, bringing in significantly more revenue for highway improvement projects. In Texas, legislation that passed in 2009 significantly changed the way that vehicles are registered after August 2011. Rather than paying a fee based on the age of the vehicle, drivers in Texas will now pay by the vehicle's weight, on top of a flat fee. This change will bring significantly more revenue to the state.

In addition to collecting fees, states often establish other requirements for motor vehicle registration (Figure 1). Thirty-five states and the District of Columbia require proof of insurance at the time of registration. In Arizona and California, proof must be presented within 30 days of registration.

**Figure 1. Proof of Insurance or Financial Responsibility Required at the Time of Motor Vehicle Registration**



Sources: National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011; AAA *Digest of Motor Laws 2011*.

## REGISTRATION RENEWAL

In most states, the days are long gone when drivers could renew vehicle registration only in person or through the mail. As technology continues to streamline government services, motor vehicle divisions are developing new ways to improve customer service and simultaneously increase government efficiency. A major advantage of these new methods of registration is that drivers generally can renew their registration from home 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

### *Online Renewal*

Although online renewal poses new security challenges, in a majority of states renewal is an easy option for vehicle registration. In 1999, only nine states offered online motor vehicle registration renewal; in 2007, 41 states and the District of Columbia offered it. Online registration renewal can be convenient, but some states offer it only to residents in select counties or to motorists who qualify to register online. In Alabama, online motor vehicle reg-

### **Improper Car Registration in Neighboring States: Rate Evasion**

Some vehicle owners have attempted to avoid higher taxes and insurance rates in their home state by illegally registering their vehicles in neighboring states. Sometimes called “rate evasion” this type of vehicle registration fraud involves a resident of one state fraudulently registering and insuring his or her vehicle in a neighboring state in order to avoid higher fees in the home state. Unfortunately, rate evasion causes the state to lose substantial revenue from registration fees. A study showed that car insurance companies in New York experienced a 20 percent to 50 percent increase in insurance rate evasion cases in 2009. The study noted that millions of dollars in registration fees and revenues that are rightfully the state’s are lost every year.

In 2010, the New Jersey Legislature introduced a bill that would make “rate evasion” and “reverse rate evasion” a form of insurance fraud with criminal penalties. The bill remained in committee.

istration renewal is available, but only in 44 of 67 counties. California motorists can renew their registration online only if their insurance company reports electronically to the California DMV, the drivers' address has not changed, they have no outstanding parking or traffic tickets, and they have a smog certificate on file with the DMV. Iowa allows online renewals if the renewal notice was sent with a pin number and all registration fees are paid. The Arizona online renewal site, ServiceArizona goes even further. It allows vehicle registration renewal online, and fleet registration renewals, address and e-mail changes, duplicate driver's license orders, voter registration, license plate refunds and many other services. The convenience and speed of online motor vehicle registration renewal is an attractive option for busy motorists who do not have time to wait in line at the local DMV.

Because identity theft is a national threat, the security of online motor vehicle registration renewal is a concern for both users of the sites and for the state DMVs. The ServiceArizona site explains that "... all confidential records are kept locked inside an 'electronic vault' protected by IBM's most advanced security technologies and among the most comprehensive security programs and services in the industry..." The site also conducts all transactions in a secured mode using encryption. IBM audits the security of ServiceArizona several times a year. MS1Stop.com is a Mississippi-based company that has partnered with Mississippi counties to provide online registration renewal. In its security message, MS1Stop.com says, "Paying government fees online is, in fact, safer than many other methods of payment. Using our system, your personal information is encrypted and secure from beginning to end. We employ multiple forms of security technology to ensure the safety and integrity of your transactions."



Motor vehicle departments around the country are moving to bring more information to their websites. This move is designed to increase the amount of information that motorists can receive without using employee time. Rather than calling the office, a driver can go online to find the steps to register and title a vehicle, the fee schedules, directions to the office, applicable laws and regulation, and more. Recently, some DMVs have begun putting up-to-the minute wait-time information on the internet, so that if drivers must come into the office they can plan accordingly, and perhaps shop around for offices with shorter wait times.

### *Other Renewal Methods*

In January of 2011, the Virginia DMV reinstated DMV 2 GO, a mobile customer service center that can process all DMV transactions including driver's licenses, handicapped parking permits, registrations and titles, and specialty plates. DMV 2 GO is a 32-foot RV converted to a DMV on wheels. The goal is to provide services to a variety of large businesses, colleges and universities. Also in 2011, the Indiana Bureau of Motor Vehicles started allowing customers to process their registration renewal by phone, in addition to renewing online or by mail.

Maryland permits registrants to use automated teller-style machines for registration renewal. Customers must have their Social Security number, license plate number, and insurance information to use the terminals; when the process is completed, the renewal sticker and registration are printed. Maryland provides ATM-style terminals at its DMV locations with motor vehicle registration renewal services. Nevada and Vermont also offer registration renewal at DMV services and registration renewal at kiosks. In FY 2009, kiosks in Nevada handled almost 353,000 trans-

actions, bringing in more than \$50 million in revenue to the state. In June of 2011, the Nevada Legislature passed SB 441 to allow DMV kiosks to be put in grocery stores and other convenient locations.

## LICENSE PLATES

Every motor vehicle must be registered with state or local authorities and issued a license plate. License plates help law enforcement agencies, motor vehicle authorities, and others identify vehicles and provide proof that the registrant has paid the proper registration fee and taxes on the vehicle. License plates also offer information such as the weight class, the county in which the vehicle is registered, use restrictions, and the age and weight of the vehicle.



In addition, some license plates show whether the owner of the vehicle is a member of a special organization or group. Because of the important functions of license plates and the popularity of specialty plates, state legislatures consider many license plate-related bills every session. For more information on license plates see <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=18456>

### *Specialty Plates*

#### *Definition and Trends*

Specialty plates are license plates that differ in design from the standard state license plate, although states often use different terms and definitions for plates that deviate from the standard. The umbrella terms “specialty plates” and “special plates” often include both special interest fundraising plates and other types of plates. The purchaser of a specialty plate that supports a special interest generally pays a fee in addition to the regular registration fee, and some percentage of the revenue goes to that special interest organization. In most states however, disability plates and some veteran’s license plates are provided at no additional charge to the registrant. Types of specialty plates include, but are not limited to, civic and community organizations, colleges and universities, environmental groups and military personnel. Many states offer license plates that benefit and educate about causes such as breast cancer awareness and organ donation. Colorado has begun issuing a plate with the inscription “Advancing Clean Energy” the proceeds from which offset the carbon dioxide emissions produced by driving the car. “Gold Star” license plates have been issued in Georgia and Nebraska to honor the family members of service men and women who have been killed in action while serving in the armed forces.

Specialty license plate designs may run up against resistance, however. While courts have consistently stated that license plates are private speech, the fact that they are issued by governmental agencies brings First Amendment issues to many people’s minds. The “Choose Life” specialty plate has caused controversy around the country. Twenty four states currently distribute the specialty plate, which helps organizations distribute proceeds to “...facilitate and encourage adoption as a positive choice for women with unplanned pregnancies.” Organizations such as the ACLU and Planned Parenthood argue that these plates violate the First Amendment by allowing only one point of view on a public forum (a state license plate). Opponents of “Choose Life” plates argue that they also should have the opportunity to display their opinions on a license plate. Litigation has delayed the production and sale of these plates in a number of states.

Indiana provides an “In God We Trust” specialty plate at no extra cost. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sued to force the state to charge the regular \$15 administrative fee that is required for specialty plates. The courts found for the state, which claimed that the plate is not a specialty plate, but a second standard plate and is not subject to an additional fee. Georgia offers an optional sticker for \$1 that allows residents to affix “In God We Trust” to the bottom of their license plate. In 2009 in South Carolina, the courts determined that an “I Believe” plate containing the image of a cross was not an allowed specialty plate. The plate had been put forward by the Legislature instead of a private group, causing the judge to rule that it was public, rather than private, speech. The public speech in this instance was construed as the state unconstitutionally favoring one religion (Christianity) over another.

### *Special Interest Plate Cost and Organizational Proceeds*

The amount of the additional fee that a sponsoring organization receives generally depends on the type and price of the specialty plate. In Illinois, for example, registrants pay the standard registration fee of \$99, plus \$40 for a set of environmental plates. Of this amount, \$15 goes toward producing the set of plates, and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources State Park Fund (Fund) receives \$25. In Indiana, the cost of special recognition plates ranges from \$15 to \$40. The Bureau of Motor Vehicles charges \$15 for administrative costs, pursuant to statute, for all special recognition license plates. Any amount above \$15 goes to the benefiting organization. In Virginia, specialty plates also vary in price. The University of Virginia Rotunda plates, for example, cost \$25 annually in addition to the regular fee. After the first 1,000 plates are sold, a \$15 contribution per plate is made to the University of Virginia. For every \$25 “Pet Friendly” license plate sold and renewed in Arizona, \$17 goes to a special fund to pay for spaying and neutering animals.

Proceeds vary in terms of total annual revenue raised by the benefiting organization for which the special interest specialty plates were issued, depending on the type of plate. In Nevada, for example, “Centennial Commemorative” plates representing Las Vegas’ 100<sup>th</sup> birthday raised about \$1 million between October 2002 and October 2004. Funds were used for a variety of centennial celebrations throughout 2005.

### *Disadvantages to Issuing Specialty Plates*

Some state officials have expressed concern about the expense of producing specialty plates that are not in high demand. The most popular plate in Illinois—the environmental plate—reached its peak registration in 1998 with approximately 93,000 registrations; by 2010, that number had decreased to around 25,000. Illinois has had to use additional money from the General Fund to sustain programs that once were funded by violence prevention license plate sales.

Some officials and other groups have expressed concern about the large number of specialty plates issued in various states. Virginia, for example, offers approximately 180 specialty plates, and Maryland tops the charts at more than 700. In 2007 in North Carolina, 14 bills were introduced that would allow special license plates to be produced for organizations ranging from Hospice Care Workers to the National Rifle Association. In 2011, Nevada set a statutory limit that allows only 30 specialty license plates to be in circulation at any one time.

According to *The Fast Track to Vehicle Services Facts: 2003 Edition*, (the last survey available) some law enforcement officials in at least 12 responding jurisdictions—Alabama, California, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Montana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Utah and Virginia—have expressed concern about the popularity of specialty license plates. As some law enforcement officials have pointed out, the more plate variation in a state, the more difficult it is for officers to quickly recognize the state that issued the plates. Law enforcement officials in Iowa and Utah expressed concern about the difficulty in recognizing invalid or illegitimate specialty plates, especially a concern for out-of-state plates. The other states also indicated that problems arise given the number and diversity of specialty plates. In March 2006, Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White issued a guide to help law enforcement officials and personnel identify the various specialty license plates. Illinois' problem is especially acute because they issue the same alphanumeric code for different license plate designs, causing cases of mistaken vehicle identity.

An additional concern among some organizations, policymakers and citizens is that states should not sanction political statements or assist political groups in raising money by issuing certain controversial special interest plates. Virginia House Bill 1305, for example, approved in 1999 allowed for the issuance of a special license plate for members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans but prohibited the incorporation of any logo or emblem in the design of the plate. The Virginia House of Delegates voted to remove the Confederate flag from the Sons of Confederate Veterans' plate after concern was expressed by the legislature's black caucus. During the discussion, it was noted that Maryland and North Carolina specialty plates with the Confederate flag were approved and upheld by the courts. In 2011, the group launched efforts in three states, Florida, Texas and Kentucky, to get their special plate approved. If they are successful, it would bring to nine the number of states that offer a similar plate. Similarly, 10 states introduced legislation in 2011 to create "Tea Party" license plates that feature the pre-Revolutionary War era Gadsden flag. Arizona approved the design and will offer it in 2012. This plate, as well, has raised concerns about government assistance for political groups.

### *New Requirements for Issuing Specialty Plates*

Because of the increase in specialty plates in many states, more than 30 states require that an organization guarantee a certain number of sales before a specialty plate can be issued. In Florida, for example, a specialty plate proposal now requires a survey from the organization with 30,000 names of individuals who are interested in purchasing the new specialty plate, a \$60,000 application fee to cover departmental expenses relating to reviewing the application and design, and an analysis of the financial impact and marketing strategies for the new license plate. After departmental review, the Florida Legislature then must approve the proposed specialty plate. Idaho Code section 49-402C(6) requires the Idaho Transportation Department to advise the Legislature if a specific special license plate is issued to fewer than 1,000 vehicles per year for two consecutive years. If so, the special license plate could be discontinued. Arizona Revised Statute §28-2404 permits organizations with fewer than 200 members to submit a request for a special plate provided the organization consents to covering production and program expenses. In West Virginia, §17A-3-4 prohibits charitable and educational organizations from offering certain special vehicle registration plates. In 2007, Legislative Bill 437 was introduced in Nebraska. It states that if the cost of manufacturing any category of specialty license plates at any time exceeds the amount charged for regular license plates, any money that is supposed to be credited to a fund (i.e., Save

the Trees Fund) will instead go to the state highway trust fund until the state has recouped the difference. LB 437 did not pass out of the Transportation and Telecommunications Committee before the 2007 legislative session adjourned. Colorado amended its statute in 2011 to update the retirement schedule for a number of specialty plates. If the plates do not hit sales targets they will be phased-out when the statutory deadline is reached.

### *Personalized Plates*

Personalized plates—sometimes referred to as vanity, custom or prestige plates—allow motorists to put their names, initials or another message on their license plate, generally for an additional fee. These plates are offered in every state and the District of Columbia. Many states have established guidelines to ensure that certain types of offensive messages are not approved for personalized plates and some states have compiled a list of words that will not be approved. Messages are cross-checked in multiple databases, and those that are sexual in nature, drug-related, racially or ethnically degrading, and profane generally are denied issuance. Examples of messages rejected by the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles, for example, include “NOCOPS,” “GOT BEER,” “PROZAC,” “MAFIA1” and “GONAKED.” One question that arises with safeguarding against offensive material is who determines what is offensive. Some messages on personalized license plates have become a source of controversy in the last five years. In 2007, the American Civil Liberties Union became involved in a South Dakota case, in which the state requested recall of an “MPEACHW” plate. The plates were ultimately returned to the driver. In October 2010, the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the state could not limit drivers in Vermont from displaying religious messages on their personalized plates. The state can still ban vanity plates that reference illicit drugs, racial epithets or other offensive material, but it may not reject vanity plates with religious messages, such as “PSALM48” “PRCHR.” In 2008, the South Dakota Legislature introduced a bill that would prohibit personalized plates altogether. It did not pass.

### *Special Plates for Drunk Drivers and Sex Offenders*

Some states now identify drunk drivers and sex offenders in the community by issuing offenders special license plates or license plate stickers.

Statutory provisions in three states—Georgia, Minnesota and Ohio—require special plates for convicted drunk driving (DUI) offenders. Georgia and Minnesota plates carry a series of special numbers or letters that are readily identifiable by law enforcement officers but are less obvious to the public; Ohio’s red and yellow plates can be easily identified by the general public. Both Iowa and Oregon had specialty plates for DUI offenders, but the statutes have been repealed and the plates are no longer in use. Several bills are introduced in legislatures across the country each year proposing similar programs; in 2011, both Washington and South Dakota had such efforts.

Advocates for special plates for convicted drunk drivers view them as a deterrent to drunk driving. Opponents raise concerns about the constitutional implications of such license plates as probable cause for traffic stops. Another concern is the privacy rights of the convicted drunk driver; people convicted of other crimes are not necessarily readily identifiable to the public.

In three states—Alabama, Ohio and Wisconsin—legislation was introduced in 2007 that would require convicted sex offenders to display special license plates. All of these efforts failed. Proponents of this legislation hoped the plates would make it easy to identify sex offenders in the community and that children would be better protected. Opponents of the bills expressed many of the same concerns with sex offender plates as those related to DUI offender plates.

## OTHER LICENSE PLATE ISSUES

### *Two License Plates Required*

Thirty states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands require that automobiles have a license plate on both the front and back of the vehicle. Proponents of two license plates argue that it increases safety and helps law enforcement officials. For example, supporters have suggested that two license plates help photo radar and red light enforcement because photos can be taken from both the front and back of the car. Opponents, however, suggest that two-plate systems increase the likelihood of fraud because a vehicle owner might put the second plate on another unregistered vehicle, thus evading registration taxes and fees. Another concern is the expense of issuing twice as many plates. In 2006, Wisconsin transportation officials said the state could save \$585,000 a year by requiring one license plate on each vehicle instead of two. In 2001, the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles estimated it could save \$1.7 million annually by issuing only one license plate. Missouri, Nebraska and Washington all considered legislation in 2011 to require only one license plate.

### *Frames and Covers*

All 50 states address license plate frames and covers because certain frames and covers can impair visibility for law enforcement officers. Some states directly regulate license plate frames and covers, while others more generally prohibit the obstruction of license plate readability. Utah law requires the license plate to be clearly legible from a distance of at least 100 feet during daylight hours. More regulations and prohibitions are imposed on covers than on frames. In California, it is unlawful to cover a license plate, even if the cover is transparent. In a federal case out of California, the court found that a tow hitch left on a vehicle when a trailer was not being towed could be considered an obstruction, even if it only blocks the view of a portion of the plate from only a small angle. North Carolina attempted to pass a law similar to California's in 2009 but the measure failed. Although many states allow frames, they permit only covers that in no way alter the color or appearance of a license plate. Missouri SB 105, introduced in 2007, would have allowed a plate to be encased in a transparent cover so long as the plate is plainly visible and its reflective qualities are not impaired. It too failed.

### *Corporate-sponsored Plates*

In 2011, the Illinois legislature enacted a law requiring a the secretary of state to conduct a feasibility study for “the implementation of a program for corporate-sponsored license plates.” The secretary of state will report findings on how to maximize profits for the state, public interest and the cost of implementation of such a program in early 2012. The concept of corporate-sponsored license plates is that the vehicle owner would receive a discounted rate for a license plate and a

corporate sponsor would be provided space to advertise on the plate. Companies would also pay the state a fee to participate in the program.

## CONCLUSION

With hundreds of millions of vehicles to keep track of in the United States, registration and licensing systems are critical. Law enforcement officers need to quickly determine the ownership and status of a vehicle for everything from vehicle theft and fugitive searches to parking tickets and moving violations. State officials need to be sure that proper taxes on the vehicle have been paid. Each state has distinct rules governing registration and licensing. While motor vehicle registration fees vary significantly from state to state, some identifiable trends are evident. Registration and license plate fees are gradually increasing in many states as they look for new sources of revenue. As mandated by state codes, the collected fees are distributed to various programs and funds, from state highway improvement to emergency medical services training. More technologically advanced registration renewal methods offer new ways of paying registration fees. All these methods aim to help states provide better, more efficient service, while keeping administration costs as low as possible. Many drivers opt for personalized and specialty plates when registering. Whether the advantages in terms of revenue gain—especially for benefiting organizations—outweigh the disadvantages of specialty plates remains a topic of discussion.

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ISBN 978-1-58024-644-6