



LRO SNAPSHOT

A policy brief from the Legislative Research Office

License plate designs reflect Nebraska's diversity

By Kate Gaul, Research Analyst

Motor vehicle license plates have long been a source of interest, pride, and consternation among Nebraska drivers. And what Nebraska family hasn't looked for license plates on a long road trip?

And there will be plenty more plates to identify after the 2019 legislative session. Painted box turtles, support for military troops, new Military Honor plates recognizing wartime service, prostate cancer awareness, spaying and neutering pets, and wildlife conservation were among the proposed plates' subjects.

With legislative approval of some of these proposals, Nebraska's license plate designs are poised to exceed 30.

License Plate History

License plate choices were unknown to Nebraska's early drivers in 1905, when the Legislature first required motorists to register their vehicles with the Secretary of State. Motorists had to make their own license plates out of leather, affixed with metal numbers to the state's specifications. There were no mountain lions nor even any discrete oxen pulling covered wagons.

According to the website allaboutlicenseplates.com, Nebraska registered 571 vehicles in 1905. Today, there are over 2 million motor vehicles registered annually.

The state began issuing license plates in 1915—104 years before the Legislature would authorize a separate Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). The plates were two colors and they changed every year. Initially only one rear plate was required for each vehicle, a practice that did not change until 1921.

In 1922, the state began the practice of using prefix numbers to identify the county of registration, based on the number of vehicles registered in each county. Douglas County had the most and became No. 1. This county-identifier system continued unchanged until 2001, when the Legislature authorized the issuance of alphanumeric plates in the state's three largest counties as a compromise after a contentious battle over a proposal to switch all Nebraska license plates to the alphanumeric system.

Although colors changed with each new plate issued, deviation from a standard plate for all vehicles did not occur until 1953, when a specialty plate became available to amateur radio licensees.

1903



1941



1959



1987



1999



2017





License Plates in the Modern Era

Over the years, Nebraska's plates began to reflect notable events such as the country's bicentennial in 1976 and Nebraska's sesquicentennial in 2017; to showcase the state's attributes such as the State Capitol, Sandhill cranes, and Chimney Rock; and to display a variety of slogans. "The Beef State" graced plates from 1956 to 1966 and "The Cornhusker State" from 1969 to 1975.

In 1971, the Legislature authorized message plates. "Personalized prestige plates" were allowed only on the standard issue plates and could not "express, connote, or imply any obscene or objectionable" message. The DMV was and remains the arbiter of good taste in license plates.

In the 1980s, plates were authorized honoring the sacrifices of the nation's veterans, specifically: Prisoners of war (1984); Pearl Harbor survivors (1986); and disabled veterans and Purple Heart recipients (both in 1989). Displaying these plates was limited to qualifying Nebraskans. In 2007, legislators honored the sacrifices made by military families with the Gold Star Family plate. And, in 2014, legislators authorized a series of Military Honor plates that eventually grew to recognize six branches of military service and five reserve units. In 2019, legislators added six new plates to this military family.

The first specialty plate available to the general public came in 1996, when the Legislature authorized Nebraska Cornhusker Spirit plates at the request of the University of Nebraska. Initially, a portion of the plates' fees went to fund athletic department services and university facility repair. (The legislation capped the university's share of the fees at \$5 million.)

In 2015, the Legislature authorized a plate celebrating Nebraska's 150th birthday, with some of the proceeds helping to pay for the state's celebration. But the most popular plate in the DMV repertoire remains the mountain lion conservation plate, which was authorized in 2016. That

same year, legislators approved a plate supporting breast cancer survivors. Two additional plates gained legislative approval in 2017, the Choose Life plate and the Native American Cultural Awareness and History plate.

Individual legislative authorization of specialty plates is not the only way license plate diversity has grown. Nonprofit organizations can propose plates highlighting their causes under legislation passed in 2009. How else to explain an African elephant adorning Nebraska-registered vehicles?

Qualifying organizations must have a primary purpose of serving the community, and cannot be discriminatory in action nor promote any specific product or brand. Additionally, DMV requires a threshold of 250 prepaid applications from persons who want the organization's plate.



Gold Star Family License plates are available, in lieu of regular license plates, to families of persons who have died while in good standing on active duty in the military service of the United States. Photos courtesy Nebraska DMV

Eleven nonprofits have made the grade: Cattlemen Research and Education Foundation, the Corn Growers Association, Ducks Unlimited, Planned Parenthood, Sammy's Superheroes (childhood cancer awareness)¹, the Henry Doorly Zoo, the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Serious Injury and Line-of-Duty Death Response Team, Friends of the Union Pacific Railroad Museum, University of Nebraska-Omaha Mavericks, and the Creighton University Blue Jays. The general public is not required to be a member to sport a plate representing an organization.

Finally, for vehicles not used for regular transportation, the DMV issues plates in two categories: historical and special interest. Historical vehicles must be 30 or more years old. Actual vintage plates from the year of the vehicle's manufacture can be substituted for the issued historical plate with DMV approval. Special interest vehicles are collector cars being restored or maintained as a hobby, but not yet old enough to be categorized as historical.

To view all Nebraska's current specialty and organizational license plates, go to <https://dmv.nebraska.gov/dvr/license-plateshh>

Looking for a little more history? See, <https://dmv.nebraska.gov/dvr/history-license-plates>

1. LB 356 in the 2019 Legislature changes Sammy's Superheroes to a state authorized specialty plate, which will allow a portion of its fees to be directed to the University of Nebraska Medical Center for pediatric cancer research. Fees collected on organization plates cannot be directed to the causes they promote.