



**House
Legislative
Analysis
Section**

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SPECIAL PLATES FOR VETS, NAT'L GUARD

**House Bills 4170-4173 as enrolled
Third Analysis (6-19-89)**

**Sponsor: Rep. Robert DeMars
House Committee: Military and Veterans' Affairs
Senate Committee: Local Government and Veterans**

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

Since 1982, Michigan has honored U.S. veterans who are former prisoners of war by allowing them to obtain specially inscribed license plates. This past summer, Public Acts 148 and 150 made specially inscribed plates available to veterans of World War I, recipients of the purple heart, and survivors of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It has now been proposed that special plates be made available to veterans of World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and to current and former members of the National Guard.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILLS:

The bills would amend the Michigan Vehicle Code to allow veterans of World War II (House Bill 4170, MCL 257.803h), Korea (House Bill 4171, MCL 257.803j), and Vietnam (House Bill 4172, MCL 257.803k), as well as national guard members (House Bill 4173, MCL 257.803i), to get special license plates. In each case, the special plate would display an appropriate "vignette" (a decal) preceding the registration numbers and have the word "veteran" or "national guard" inscribed beneath the numbers. The plate would cost \$5 in addition to the regular registration fee, and provision would be made for handicappers to be issued handicapper stickers. The bills would take effect November 11, 1989.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

The Department of State estimates that the bills will cost \$1.9 million, which will be covered by the \$5 service fee charged for each plate. (6-19-89)

ARGUMENTS:

For:

The bills would give war veterans and National Guard members the same honor and recognition that the state now gives former prisoners of war, Pearl Harbor survivors, purple heart recipients, and World War I veterans. The specially inscribed license plates proposed by the bills could do more than serve as a means of honoring the individual and reminding the public of the services rendered and hardships endured by that person: such plates also enable veterans to strike up acquaintances with each other and enjoy the satisfaction and camaraderie that comes from shared experience.

For:

The Senate amendment to the House bills would require that a vignette be displayed on the plate rather than having the plate inscribed with special identification numbers and special designations. This would allow the secretary of state to issue special decals for each plate, helping reduce the costs for producing the plates and keeping costs per plate within the \$5 service fee.

For:

It would seem particularly appropriate to allow members of the Michigan National Guard to obtain special license plates, thereby recognizing their service to the state and their assistance to civil authority. According to a Department of Military Affairs analysis, 28 states presently recognize national guard members through a variety of license plate arrangements. Michigan should do so as well.

Against:

Special license plates honoring particular groups are not cost effective, they can proliferate endlessly, they are inappropriate as a way to honor special groups, and there are already private sector ways to obtain special nonofficial identification plates for motor vehicles.

The basic purpose of license plates is to identify vehicles for law enforcement purposes, rather than providing public recognition of special groups. While it is appropriate to respect and honor veterans and their various sacrifices, it is not appropriate to testify to this respect by amending the law to provide for special license plates for every group of veterans that falls into a special category. In fact, it can be argued that the bills tend to trivialize veterans' issues, and divert attention from more important matters, such as funding for veterans' hospitals.

What is more, the most cost-effective method of issuing license plates is by designing a single, standard plate for everyone. There are many potential special categories of veterans and other people, all deserving of honor; the creation of more and more special license plates can be a never-ending process which increases the administrative costs associated with issuing license plates while decreasing the amount of money in the Transportation Fund that could be devoted to the construction and maintenance of streets and highways. Finally, veterans' (and other) groups already can buy their own special recognition plates from private sector manufacturers of novelty plates, thereby recognizing veterans without government intervention.

Response: Although identification for purposes of law enforcement may be the primary purpose of license plates, there is no reason why license plates shouldn't also be used for other purposes, provided that these other purposes do not interfere with law enforcement functions. (In fact, it can be argued that distinctive license plates can enhance identification of vehicles for law enforcement purposes, and, in the case of the special national guard plates, readily identify national guard members to law enforcement personnel during emergencies.) In any case, whether or not, as a matter of principle, special license plates ought to be used to honor certain groups would seem to be a moot point, since there already are a number of such plates that do just that. And while it may be true that special license plates would not be the way to honor

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OVER

every group deserving of public recognition, it does seem particularly appropriate that veterans and national guard members be honored by state-issued plates rather than private sector plates, since these groups have served their governments in official capacities.