



**SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF MOTOR VEHICLES
POLICY RG-504
SPECIALIZED PLATES FOR ORGANIZATIONS**

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SECTION I: DEFINITIONS

Applicable non-profit organization: Non-profit organization currently classified as a 501(c)(3), 501(c)(6), 501(c)(7), or 501(c)(8) organizations under Federal Internal Revenue Code guidelines as evidenced by documentation from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

501(c)(3): Tax exempt status granted under Federal Internal Revenue Code to organizations commonly referred to as charitable organizations.

501(c)(6): Tax exempt status granted under Federal Internal Revenue Code to business league, board of trade and chamber of commerce organization.

501(c)(7): Tax exempt status granted under Federal Internal Revenue Code to social clubs organized for pleasure, recreation, and other similar non-profitable purposes and substantially all of their activities must be for these purposes.

501(c)(8): Tax exempt status granted under Federal Internal Revenue Code to Fraternal Organizations.

Plate Prefix: Letter combination at beginning of plate text distinguishing a unique specialty plate class from another.

Plate Text: Sequence of letters and numbers uniquely identifying each license plate.

Private passenger motor vehicle or private passenger-carrying motor vehicle: As defined in §56-3-630, every motor vehicle which is designed, used, and maintained for the transportation of ten or fewer persons and trucks having an empty weight of nine thousand pounds or less and a gross weight of eleven thousand pounds or less, except a motorcycle, three-wheel vehicle, or motor-driven cycle.

Sponsoring Organization: Organization sponsoring the plate production. Applications must be submitted in the sponsoring organization's name. For non-profit organizations, the sponsoring organization must provide proof from the IRS that it has held and maintained its non-profit status for at least five years prior to the application date.

Sponsoring Organization Agent: A sponsoring organization can designate one agent or agent organization that is authorized to act on the organization's behalf and to serve as intermediary between the sponsoring organization and the Department. The sponsoring organization can also designate that the Department distribute proceeds of the plate to the agent. An example would be a national organization that designates a SC chapter of the organization as its agent.

SECTION II: PURPOSE/BACKGROUND

Special license plates are produced in two ways: non-profit organizations meeting the requirements of S.C. Code of Laws §56-3-8000 can apply directly for a plate, without prior legislative approval; all other organizations (organizations that are not non-profit organizations) must obtain specific authorizing legislation before a plate can be designed or produced.

S.C. Code of Laws §56-3-8000 prescribes the process for application for and issuance of special motor vehicle license plates requested by applicable non-profit organizations. S.C. Code of Laws §56-3-8100 and specific sections of the Code authorizing the production of individual specialty plates prescribe the process for other organizations seeking specialty plates.

This policy sets forth the requirements for: making application for a specialized plate by an applicable non-profit organization or any other organization authorized by specific statute; approval of the plate design by the Department; appeal of the Department's design decisions, where applicable; production and distribution of the plate; persons eligible to purchase the plate; and distribution of the funds collected from the sale of the plates.



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Organizations applying for approval of a specialized plate must meet all application requirements established in this policy before the Department will consider the proposed license plate design.

This policy applies to non-profit organization plates that meet the requirements under this policy as well as specialty plates requested by any other organization or for any other purpose authorized by law.

Requested plates may have imprinted on the plate the emblem, a seal, or other symbol of applicable organizations that the Department considers representative of the organization. It is the intent of the Department to ensure that all designs submitted for consideration are not offensive and meet community standards of propriety. Designs displayed on state license plates are approved by the State for display to all audiences on the public highways and are the sole responsibility of the State. While the Department can be flexible in considering a range of potential specialty license plates, the public must also be protected from state action that might be construed as using taxpayer-generated funding to create messages or impressions that are not appropriate for a governmental entity.

This policy is also intended to protect the Department, as a public entity acting on behalf of all the citizens, from allegations that it improperly sponsored partisan messages, divisive positions, or inappropriate language or designs. To that end the Department will employ criteria published in this policy during its design review process.

SECTION III: GUIDELINES

A. Application for Design Approval

1. All Applications for organization plates

In order to request approval for a specialty plate governed under this policy, the sponsoring organization must provide the following to the Department's Special Plate Review Officer:

- a. A request for consideration on the sponsoring organization's letterhead. If an individual is requesting production of a plate authorized by statute, the individual should submit a letter detailing the individual's interest in serving as point of contact for the plate.
- b. An Application for Approval of Specialty Plate, Form RG-504a (Attachment 1), completed in the name of the sponsoring organization, along with an authorized contact within the sponsoring organization. If there is no sponsoring organization, the plate information and contact information for the individual should be completed.
- c. Sponsoring organizations may designate an individual or organization to act as an agent on behalf of the sponsoring organization. Organizations assigning an agent individual or organization must complete form RG-504d (Attachment 5) to authorize the Department's dealings with the agent.
- d. Written authorization for the use of any copyrighted or registered logo, trademark, or design to be used on the plate.
- e. License plate artwork for the design of the plate on CD/diskette in specified graphic format, and one (1) color hard copy of the artwork. Artwork for plate design must meet all specifications set forth in Section III.B.2. below.
- f. A marketing plan that includes target audience, media to be used, and text of media messages.
- g. A requested plate prefix, if a special prefix is desired. It is the Department's responsibility to assign plate prefixes. Not all plate prefixes are available; while the Department will make an effort to accommodate specific prefix requests, no plate prefix is guaranteed.
- h. Non-profit organizations applying for a special plate under §56-3-8000 are authorized to assess a special plate fee in addition to the regular plate fee. Other organizations applying for a special plate under Section 56-3-8100 are authorized to assess a special plate fee only if a specific fee is not prescribed or excluded by law.
 - Application for Approval of Organizational Plate, Form RG-504a, must include the amount of the fee to be charged for the plate, above and beyond the normal registration fee, Non-profit organizations must specify how the fee will be used or distributed.
 - Non-profit organizations applying under Section 56-3-8000 will receive the proceeds from this special plate fee; for plates that are authorized by statute, organizations can receive proceeds from the plate only if specifically authorized by statute. All organizations should be aware that a portion



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of the additional plate fee will be retained by the Department to defray the expenses of producing and administering special license plates.

- The Department will disburse funds collected from the special fee directly to the sponsoring organization or its designated agent. It is the sponsoring organization's or agent's responsibility to distribute the disbursed funds to any other entities.
- Organizations that are authorized to receive funds from the sale of plates must also submit Internal Revenue Service form W-9 before any funds can be distributed by the Department.

2. Additional Requirements for Non-Profit Specialty Plates under §56-3-8000

- a. Non-profit organizations must also submit:
 - Documentation from the Internal Revenue Service showing that the organization currently has a 501(c)(3), 501(c)(6), 501(c)(7), or 501(c)(8) tax exempt status.
 - Documentation in the form of prior tax returns or other documentation from the Internal Revenue Service showing that the sponsoring organization has maintained the same tax-exempt status for at least five years prior to the date of application.
 - Because only the sponsoring organization can make application for a plate design, the sponsoring organization must provide proof of its non-profit status.

The Department will return incomplete applications to the sponsoring organization's contact individual, detailing additional items required before the Department will consider the application. (Attachment 6 – Application Receipt Letter).

3. Applications for motorcycle plates

- a. Generally, South Carolina Law allows for specialty plates to be placed on private passenger vehicles only. However, there are certain specialty plates for which the law authorizes the production of plates for use on motorcycles.
- b. The Department is authorized to allow for the design and production of special motorcycle plates for all plates authorized under SC Code of Law §56-3-8000. Organizations seeking to make application for a motorcycle special plate under this statute are required to file a separate application for motorcycle plates. An organization seeking a specialty plate for both a private passenger vehicle and motorcycle must apply separately for each plate, and must meet all application and design requirements for each application, including the requirement to provide \$4000 or 400 prepaid applications before the motorcycle plate can be produced.
- c. For other motorcycle plates authorized by specific statute subject to the production and distribution rules specified in 56-3-8100, the Department will require 400 prepaid applications or \$4000 before the motorcycle plate can be produced, even if a private passenger vehicle plate is already available.

B. Design Review Process

1. Special Plate Review Panel

- a. The Director will appoint a Plate Review Panel.
- b. The Plate Review Panel is charged with the following functions:
 - Receive and review all applications from organizations for special plate designs;
 - Handle all correspondence with organizations requesting a special plate;
 - Review all designs for new plate series issued by the Department;
 - Review revised designs of existing plate series;
 - Assign plate classes and number series for all Department-issued plates;
 - Establish fee collection and distribution structure for all plates;
 - Make recommendations to Director or designee on approval, conditional approval, or rejection of all plate designs, including organizational plates;
 - Set plate replacement cycles.



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- c. The Panel will be composed of the following members:
- Deputy Director, Vehicle Services – Panel chair- facilitate all meetings and meet with Chief of Staff and Director as necessary to discuss Panel recommendations;
 - Deputy Director, Support Services – legislative liaison – serve as communications conduit with legislature and ensure Department meets all legislative requirements relative to plate issuance;
 - Special Plate Review Officer (SPRO)– member of Vehicle Services staff - receive and review special organizational plate applications for completeness, maintain all application files and manage correspondence with the requesting agencies; oversee internal and external communications for approved plates;
 - Titles and Registration Manager – provide subject matter expertise;
 - Finance Director – provide guidance on fee collection and distribution issues;
 - Inventory Officer - oversee manufacture and distribution of plates upon approval of plate design; maintain communications with Committee and SPRO regarding manufacturing and distribution schedule;
 - Information Technology (IT) Specialist – provide input on system impacts of new plate series, ensure that IT systems are ready prior to release of plate for distribution;
 - Project Manager – ensure that requirements for new plate series are communicated with external vendors charged with plate production;
 - General Counsel Representative – provide legal guidance to committee.

2. General Requirements for Organizational Plates

Once the sponsoring organization provides all required application items, the Special Plate Review Officer will convene the Plate Review Panel, and prepare materials for the Panel’s review. The Panel will review the plate design to determine whether the design will be approved, conditionally approved with modifications or rejected.

a. Plate Specifications

- Organizational plate designs may include only an emblem, a seal, logo, or other symbol representative of the sponsoring organization that the Department deems appropriate.
- The name of the sponsoring organization may appear across the top of the plate.
- Plate designs may not include slogans or other text, except if such text appears within the sponsoring organization’s emblem, seal, logo, or other representative symbol, or unless a specific text is authorized by enabling legislation
- The organization’s emblem, seal, logo, or other representative symbol must be confined to the area specified on the plate design template provided by the Department.
- In order to maintain consistency among special plates and to facilitate law enforcement “South Carolina” must be located below the plate numbers as part of the plate design as it appears on the plate template provided by the Department. The plate prefix and plate text must be displayed in black.
- License plate designs cannot contain a reference to a private or public college or university in this State or use symbols, designs, or logos of these institutions without the institution’s written authorization, which must be supplied at time of application.
- If the design uses any copyrighted or registered logo, trademark, or design, the organization must submit written authorization from the owner of the copyrighted or registered logo, trademark or design.
- The background of submitted designs must contrast sufficiently with the plate number text so that law enforcement can easily read the plate.
- Designs must follow guidelines established within this policy.
- Once the Department has given preliminary approval of a design, the Department will manufacture sample plates of the approved design. Final approval of any plate design is contingent on the legibility, readability and reflectiveness of the design as determined by the plate manufacturer and State Highway Patrol.



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b. Sponsoring Organizations

- For those organizations that might have multiple chapters or sub-units throughout the state, a state-level parent organization must submit the application as the sponsoring organization on behalf of the organization as a whole.
- If the sponsoring organization is authorized by law to receive funds from the special plate fee, all eligible funds collected from the special plate fee will be distributed to the sponsoring organization or its designated agent only. The sponsoring organization or agent will disburse the funds to its chapters or other entities as detailed on the application form. For non-profit organizations, the sponsoring organization must prove its non-profit status to be eligible for receiving funds from a special assessed fee.
- The Department reserves the right to reject applications from individual chapter or branch organizations that are part of a statewide organization.

3. Design Criteria

It is the intent of the Department to ensure that all designs submitted for consideration are not offensive and meet community standards of propriety. The Department can choose to reject the production of any plate based on any of the following characteristics of the plate:

- a. Does not promote positive image for the state
- b. Low projected sales, lack of statewide appeal
- c. Controversial, low sales, or litigation in other states
- d. Production considered not to be cost beneficial to the state
- e. Partisan or misrepresentative of the sponsoring organization or another organization
- f. Potentially offensive, controversial, or inappropriate to the public
- g. Similar plate/design already exists
- h. Proliferation of specialty plates, workloads and costs to the state
- i. Advertises commercial logos or symbols
- j. Use of proceeds from plate sales considered controversial or in violation of statute/constitution
- k. Sexual or vulgar connotation
- l. Derogatory reference to an individual or group
- m. Implication extolling alcohol, drugs or other illegal activities or substances
- n. Misrepresentation of organization as law enforcement or other government entity
- o. Use of copyrighted emblem, seal, symbol, logo or registered trademark without written authorization from the owner
- p. Design interferes with legibility or readability of plate number

C. Approval Options

Based on the criteria, the Plate Review Panel will recommend on the Plate Review Disposition Form RG-504b (Attachment 2) one of the following options:

1. Approval – Recommend approval of the design

- a. The Director or designee will review recommendations and offer comments, if necessary. The Director or designee can return the application to the Review Panel for reconsideration or approve the plate design.
- b. Once the design is approved by the Director or designee, the Special Plate Review Officer will notify the sponsoring organization's contact person. (Attachment 7 – Department Review Letter).
- c. The sponsoring organization must return to the Department the Plate Review Acknowledgement Form RG-504d (Attachment 4), indicating the organization's desire to proceed with production.
- d. The sponsoring organization must submit with the letter either a check for \$4000 or 400 pre-paid applications for the plate.
- e. Once the Department has received the Plate Review Acknowledgement Form, the Department will instruct its vendor to produce a final design proof.
- f. The design proof must be approved by the sponsoring organization's contact person and the Director or designee.
- g. Once the final design proof has been approved, the Department will have sample plates produced:



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- The plate will be forwarded to Highway Patrol for legibility approval.
 - Once Highway Patrol has approved the plate, the plate will be forwarded to the organizational contact, if applicable, for approval.
 - Once the organizational contact has approved the plate, the plate will be forwarded to the Director for final approval.
- h. Director's designee will authorize the plate for production.
- i. The Department will obtain specifications and costs for plate production and inform the organization regarding the manufacturing timetable.
- j. Organizations may elect to reserve the first one hundred (100) plates in the new series for authorized customers. The organization should indicate on the Form RG-504d if it chooses to elect this option.
- k. Once plates have been produced, the organization and each person authorized to receive one of the first 100 plates must complete Form RG-504c Reserved Application for Special Plate and submit this form with the special plate application in order to obtain the specialty plate.
2. **Conditional Approval** - Review Panel suggests modifications to the plate design that would meet Departmental approval.
- a. The Review Panel will submit suggested modifications for approval to the Director or designee, who can either approve the modification or return to the Review Panel for reconsideration.
 - b. If the Director or designee approves the modified design, the Special Plate Review Officer will notify the sponsoring organization's contact person. (Attachment 7 – Department Review Letter).
 - c. All sponsoring organizations have the option of modifying and resubmitting the design as suggested by the Department, or withdrawing their request. Alternate modifications will not be considered by the Department.
 - d. Only non-profit organizations can appeal the Department's decision. If the sponsoring organization chooses to appeal, it should indicate that decision on Plate Review Acknowledgement Form RG-504d (Attachment 4), and follow the appeal process below.
 - e. If the sponsoring organization chooses to accept the modified design, the organization must resubmit the artwork for the modification.
 - f. Resubmitted design modifications will be reviewed by the Review Panel. Once the Panel approves the modification, the plate will follow the approval process specified in Section III.C.1.
3. **Rejection** -Review Panel rejects the design.
- a. The Review Panel will recommend rejection to the Director or designee who can either concur with the rejection or return to the Review Panel for reconsideration.
 - b. If the Director or designee accepts the Panel's recommendation, the Special Plate Review Officer will notify the sponsoring organization's contact person. The notification will include the reason the plate design was rejected (Attachment 7 – Department Review Letter).
 - c. If the Department rejects the design, the sponsoring organization can submit a new design.
 - d. Non-profit organizations can appeal the Department's decision.
 - e. The sponsoring organization should indicate its decision on the Plate Review Acknowledgement Form RG-504d (Attachment 4). If the non-profit organization chooses to appeal the Department's decision, it should follow the appeal process below.

D. Appeal Process

1. If the Department alters, modifies, or refuses to produce a special license plate, non-profit organizations applying for the license plate under SC Code of Laws 56-3-8000 may appeal the Department's decision to a special joint legislative committee.
2. If the Department offers conditional approval for or rejects the plate design, the Department will inform the non-profit organization in writing of its right to appeal.
3. Appeals should be directed to the legislative review committee established under S.C. Code of Laws §56-3-8000.
4. The organization's representatives are responsible for initiating the appeal with the legislative review committee.



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5. Upon request from the legislative review committee, the Department will provide the committee with the Department's review files.

E. Production, Distribution and Issuance of Approved Plates

1. The Department will initially produce the number of plates for which pre-paid applications have been submitted. If the organization has paid a flat four thousand dollar fee in lieu of the pre-paid applications, the Department will produce sufficient plates for distribution in field offices through-out the state based on anticipated statewide demand.
2. Based on anticipated statewide demand, the Department reserves the right to require that certain plates be available only through the mail.
3. Unless otherwise specified by statute, special license plates must be issued or revalidated for a biennial period which expires 24 months from the month it is issued.
4. If the Department receives fewer than 300 biennial applications and renewals for a particular plate, it shall not produce additional plates in that series, unless required by law to do so. The department shall continue to issue plates of that series until the existing inventory is exhausted.

F. Fees

1. Registration Fees
 - a. Unless otherwise specified by statute, biennial registration fees for special license plates are the regular fees set forth in Article 5, Chapter 3 of Title 56.
2. Special Plate Fees
 - a. Special plate fees, in addition to the regular biennial registration fees, may be authorized by statute. If no special plate fee is specified by statute, organizations seeking issuance of the plate under S.C. Code of Law §56-3-8000 or 56-3-8100 can request a special fee be added to the regular registration fee.
 - b. When making application for design approval, a sponsoring organization must specify the additional fee that is to be charged for the specialty plate, above the normal registration fee. Organizations eligible to receive proceeds from a special plate fee must also specify how they will use those proceeds.
 - c. The initial additional fee amount requested by the organization may be changed only every five years after the first year the plate is issued.
3. Application Fees
 - a. Once the Department has approved the plate design, the sponsoring organization must submit either 400 or more prepaid applications for the special license plate or \$4000 before the Department will begin the plate manufacture process.
 - Lump-sum Application fee
 - If the organization seeking issuance of the plate submits \$4000, the Comptroller General shall place that money into a restricted account to be used by the Department to defray the initial cost of producing the special license plate. This fee is will not be refunded to the organization.
 - Pre-paid Applications
 - Pre-paid applications must include the special plate fee as specified by the organization or as established by law. After the plate is produced, individuals submitting pre-paid applications must also pay the required biennial registration fee set forth in Article 5, Chapter 3 of Title 56.
 - Once the design has been approved, the Department will inform the organization of the production cost of the plate once that cost has been established.
 - Once the plate is distributed for general issuance, this cost will be deducted from the special plate fee before funds are distributed to the organization. The Department will retain from each plate sale the normal registration fee for statutory distribution and will also retain a portion of the additional special license fee intended to cover the Department's cost of production. The Department will disburse the remaining fees to the sponsoring organization in the month after the fees have been collected.



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G. Re-application for New Design

1. Organizations with special plates cannot request a new design until five years have elapsed from initial production.
2. Before any organization with a special plate can request a new plate design, the Department must have sold at least three hundred plates of the initial design and depleted existing inventory.
3. If an organization requesting a new design has not depleted its existing inventory, the organization can purchase the remaining inventory at the per plate cost for which the plate was manufactured.
4. The Department will periodically reissue each plate. The Department reserves the right to refuse to reissue any plate series that has not sold at least three hundred plates since the last issue. The Department will notify organizations in writing of its decision not to reissue low sales volume plates.
5. An organization requesting a new plate design may not request a change in the plate prefix. Since the plate prefix is part of the unique identifier that distinguishes individual plates for Law Enforcement, the plate prefix is not part of the plate design and is the property of the Department and not the organization.
6. When the Department approves production of a redesigned plate, the Department will remake the first 100 plate numbers in the series with the new design and offer them to the current holders of those plate numbers. Any plate numbers within the first 100 numbers that are not assigned to active plates will be provided to the sponsoring organization for reassignment.
7. All other holders of plates with the former design can retain their old plate until it needs to be replaced. If a plate needs to be replaced due to Departmental reissue or because the plate is lost, stolen, worn or damaged, the old plate will be replaced with one of the new design.
8. All organizations applying for a re-design of an existing plate must meet all requirements detailed in this policy.
9. If an organization obtained approval for a plate design prior to September 7, 2006 and wishes to receive proceeds from a special plate as provided for in S.C. Code of Law §56-3-8000 or if an organization seeks a new design, then that organization must re-submit its design, and must meet all requirements detailed in this policy..