R3J3CT3D PL8S

Hoards of Utah motorists apply for vanity license plates every year. Here are the ones deemed too offensive for the road.

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Two years ago, a national survey by New Jersey-based nonprofit Kars 4 Kids rated Utahns as some of the most polite drivers in the country. The folks behind the survey might think differently now, after seeing all the racy, offensive and just plain weird slogans that Utah motorists have tried to put on their license plates.

From 2016 to 2018, employees at the Utah Division of Motor Vehicles turned down more than 1,100 applications for vanity registration plates. Sly vehicle owners across the state requested plates full of references to guns, drugs and sex. The tide of potentially offensive material was so great that even harmless requests ended up not making the cut after being subjected to extra scrutiny. *City Weekly* obtained a list of the rejected plates in a public records request. Among our findings:

• Two dozen applicants requested plates incorporating the number 69, making blatant reference to the mythical sex position. (Although one of the plates could have also been a nod to disgraced Brooklyn rapper 6ix9ine.)

• References to drugs and guns were popular requests. Suggested vanity plates included nods to a Soviet-made assault rifle ("AK47"), a German-designed submachine gun ("MP5K4U"), the leader of a Mexican drug cartel ("ELCHAP0"), a variety of alcoholic beverages ("REDWINE," "BRUSKIS," "WSKY," "HIGHBAL") and a panoply of controlled substances ("CRANK," "SPEED," "WEEEDS," "XTCY").

• Some of the plates incorporated slang terms and pop culture references, such as "DEZNUTS" and "SN00TCH"—the latter a catch-all term popularized by movie misfits Jay and Silent Bob, but also "street slang" meaning vagina, according to Urban Dictionary.

• The potential for offense caused by ambiguous or coded license plate messages pushed DMV employees to reject plates that seemingly meant no offense. For example, employees rejected

a plate that says "YAZIDI" (apparently referring to an ethnic group in Iraq that was infamously persecuted by the militant group ISIS). They also rejected "D0 DEW," which seemingly quotes the advertising slogan of a popular caffeinated beverage. However, staffers did approve a plate that says "WWG1WGA," the call sign for followers of the pro-Trump, right-wing QAnon conspiracy theory.

These rejected plates are, of course, just a fraction of the applications that go through the Utah DMV every year. Currently, the number of drivers on the road sporting vanity plates is just north of 68,000 and counting—as 13,384 motorists have applied for personalized plates so far in the fiscal year.

But in all their vulgarity, what do these rejected plates say about Utahns? Could this represent the id lurking beneath this land of good-natured Intermountain West folk and white-bread Latter-day Saint values?

The fact is that Utah is hardly the only place in North America where drivers consistently try to sneak explicit content onto personalized license plates. Just this February, a man in Saskatchewan, Canada, made headlines when he plastered a gigantic decal onto the tailgate of his pickup truck. "ASSMAN," the decal declared in capitalized green letters—designed to resemble the province's vehicle registration plates.

The man's name is Dave Assman (pronounced "OSS-men"). For years, he'd tried unsuccessfully to get Saskatchewan motor vehicle officials to cut him a vanity plate paying tribute to his family name. His license plate-style truck decal was just the latest volley in an ongoing war between motor-vehicle officials and vanity-plate pranksters, raising provocative issues about the lines between free speech and questionable taste.

"There's always a few guys that just wanna see what they can get away with," shrugs Jeff Minard, a historian with the Automobile License Plate Collectors Association (ALPCA)—a national organization founded in 1954 that follows developments in license plate evolution and design—during an interview with *City Weekly*.

Cracking the Code

In Utah, a handful of DMV employees stand as the gatekeepers for all those wishing to put customized slogans on their vehicle registration plates.

To apply for a vanity plate, motorists must fill out a form called TC-817. The petition then goes to the DMV, where members of the Miscellaneous Services Unit will refer to policy set down in the Utah Motor Vehicle Code and draw from the DMV's own internal guidelines, seeking to weed out proposed plates that could be "offensive to good taste and decency."

"We have a section that reviews these as they come in," Monte Roberts, director of the DMV, tells *City Weekly*. He's dialed in on speakerphone at the division's Salt Lake City headquarters. The DMV is part of the Utah State Tax Commission, and as we speak he's sitting beside Tax Commission spokesperson Charlie Roberts (no relation).

"There are some that slip through the cracks, unfortunately," Monte Roberts adds. "If it's really offensive, we'll ask them to bring the plate back and do something else."

When a TC-817 lands on their desk, the aforementioned DMV staffers (who were sadly not made available for comment for this article) will run an online search of the proposed plate motto and consult Urban Dictionary for any potential pitfalls. Sometimes applicants will attempt to trick them by using numbers in place of letters, or writing messages backwards. A

plate that says "TIH2TA3," as one applicant requested several years ago, looks innocuous—until you see it in your rear-view mirror.

On rare occasions, staffers will encounter a proposed plate that's such a head-scratcher, it requires the attention of the highest official in the DMV hierarchy.

"We'll write it on the board, we'll look at it, and I'll be like, 'I see it right away,' or, 'I'm not seeing it.' And then they explain it to me," DMV director Roberts says. "It is a collaborative effort, but it's ultimately the director's decision as to whether it's issued or not. If they have concerns or questions whether or not it should be issued, they can bring it to my attention."

Pride of Plate

Minard, the ALPCA historian, says license plates with customized messages were first introduced in New Hampshire in 1957. By the 1970s, every state in the union was giving motorists the option of applying for vanity plates—offering a way for car owners to show off while state governments could benefit from added revenue.

However, license plates were serving as status symbols long before that, Minard adds.

When New York state started issuing license plates in 1901, the first ones bore the initials of whoever owned the registered car. Officials soon moved to a numerical system to avoid issuing duplicates, but it wasn't long before even seemingly random serial numbers would bear their own meanings.

In the 1920s, state agencies reserved the lowest numbered plates for political figures, philanthropists and other local VIPs.

"In some states, the first 10 numbers or the first single-digit numbers would be saved aside. The number 100 in Colorado was always saved for the sheriff," Minard says. To get one of these "prestige plates," he explains, "You have to be somebody. You have to be a thing. You have to get permission from the governor, from your senator. Somebody makes a call and they're going to take care of their friend—you know the way that works."

Later, in the run-up to World War II, Connecticut started awarding special plates to car owners with clean driving records. The plates were emblazoned with just one to three characters, letting everyone know that you were a cut above the rest.

"It was a proud thing. It showed that the state recognized that you're a safe driver," Minard says. "Cops recognized that. The DMV recognized it. Your neighbors recognized it. It was a cool thing."

Minard chuckles, thinking back to the good old days. "It was the way life oughta be, right?"

Oh, how times have changed.

Licensed to Offend

Vanity plates today tend to not be imbued with the gravitas of honor or respectability. In the cases of those that get rejected, it's quite the opposite. Hark, the motorists of Utah:

"WET V."

"EATMEE."

"DGAF."

The last one was applied for twice. It was rejected on June 24, 2016, and June 23, 2017.

At the Utah DMV, staffers have occasionally been fooled into letting an offensive plate into the wild. According to Charlie Roberts, someone called in a few years ago to complain about a

driver who had a license plate that said "IF U SEEK"—seemingly innocent, yet if you look at it the right way, you'll make out the spelling of a certain four-letter word: F, U, "SEE," K.
"They were clever about it, so we missed it," Roberts, who clearly isn't familiar with Britney Spears' discography, says. "We called them and they said, 'Yeah, you caught me,' and they sent it in and that was that."
Not all plates are rejected for obvious reasons. In 2005, the DMV approved an application from Park City gay rights activist Elizabeth Solomon to have a license plate that read "GAY WE GO." Yet officials denied two other applications she'd submitted for plates bearing the messages "GAYS R OK" and "GAY RYTS." Backed by the ACLU of Utah, she filed an appeal. The tax commission eventually voted to reverse the decision, opening the door for future LGBTQ-positive personalized plates.
Scholars and legal experts have long pondered the question of whether vanity plates constitute a form of free speech. In her 2000 article Licensed to Speak: The Case of Vanity Plates, the late law professor Marybeth Herald argues that state officials erode drivers' First Amendment rights by restricting what can be put on license plates according to subjective standards of decency or appropriateness.
"We cannot expect the First Amendment to be an effective shield when we need it for protection, if we have allowed it to be battered, broken and abused when it protects speech we do not like," Herald wrote. "So, if someone wants a plate that says 'GOVTSUX,' let her have it."
In March, *Pacific Standard* reported that the Supreme Court has never ruled on the constitutional merits of a driver's right to say what he wants on a vanity license plate. Legal experts seem split on the question of whether the vanity plate's message represents an individual's form of free expression—since the license plate is issued for legal purposes by a state body, it also becomes a form of government speech.
"The way the laws read now—and every state agrees with this—is you can do First Amendment all you want with a bumper sticker. But this license plate is a product manufactured by a state government, and we, the state government, have final say," Minard says.

Fight the Power

But what if that plate really means something to you? What if you can't bear the thought of losing your right to drive around town with plates emblazoned with an eye-catching motto like "BUDWYZR" or "RIM J0B"?
Here in Utah, vehicle owners will occasionally challenge DMV decisions about their vanity plates. If the team of vulgarity-checkers at the Miscellaneous Services Unit turns down an applicant's TC-817, the driver can file an appeal and appear before an administrative law judge at the Utah State Tax Commission building in Salt Lake City to argue their case. Members of the public can also prompt legal hearings over questionable plates if they submit a complaint to the DMV and agree to attend a hearing.
In one case, a vehicle owner sought approval for a license plate saying "RYDINHI," spokesperson Roberts recalls. DMV staff rejected it because it had a sexual connotation. The applicant appealed the decision, claiming that it was referencing a piece of country-western culture. At the hearing, a judge ended up rejecting the application, too.
"The administrative law judge that heard the appeal said, 'I see what you're saying and I don't disagree, but the law is very clear that we can't accept this,'" Roberts says.
If you're willing to take a stand on your vanity plate, this is the way to do it.

Still, DMV director Monte Roberts and spokesperson Charlie Roberts (again, they are not related) both emphasize that these hearings are not as dramatic as one might hope. These aren't life-changing legal battles, like those depicted in Hollywood courtroom dramas. Instead, they're occasional occurrences, sandwiched in between weekly hearings over issues more commonly related to property and income tax.

Rather than going through the appeals process, director Roberts says the majority of applicants just send in a new application, with the license plate reworded so as to not cause offense. In the chaos of this vulgar world, it can sometimes be easy for a message to get misunderstood. For applicants who mean well, this might be the best course of action.

"Ultimately, it's a lot cheaper for them to do it that way," Roberts says.

Other notable personalized plate rejections (we see you, Kaden):

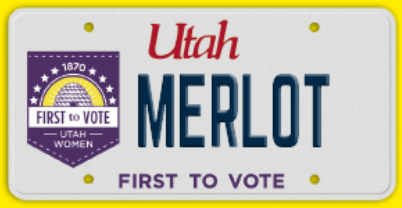
Date rejected: May 29, 2018
Reason: Public welfare

Date rejected: Sept. 6, 2017
Reason: Vulgar, derogatory, profane, obscene

Date rejected: Oct. 19, 2018
Reason: Sexual reference

Date rejected: Sept. 28, 2017
Reason: Vulgar, derogatory, profane, obscene

Date rejected: Jan. 8, 2016
Reason: Vulgar, derogatory, profane, obscene



Date rejected: Oct. 6, 2017
Reason: Drug reference

Date rejected: Aug. 25, 2017
Reason: Vulgar, derogatory, profane, obscene

Date rejected: July 26, 2017
Reason: Vulgar, derogatory, profane, obscene

Date rejected: June 6, 2016
Reason: Ehtnic heritage, race, religion

Date rejected: Aug. 21, 2017
Reason: Sexual reference

Date rejected: Sept. 7, 2018
Reason: Vulgar, derogatory, profane, obscene

Date rejected: May 16, 2018
Reason: Sexual reference

Date rejected: March 27, 2017
Reason: Vulgar, derogatory, profane, obscene

Date rejected: May 10, 2017
Reason: Vulgar, derogatory, profane, obscene

Date rejected: April 11, 2017
Reason: Vulgar, derogatory, profane, obscene