

**RCW 46.16A.200 License plates.**

\*\*\* CHANGE IN 2026 \*\*\* (SEE 2114-S.SL) \*\*\*

(1) **Design.** All license plates may be obtained by the director from the metal working plant of a state correctional facility or from any source in accordance with existing state of Washington purchasing procedures. License plates:

- (a) May vary in background, color, and design;
- (b) Must be legible and clearly identifiable as a Washington state license plate;
- (c) Must designate the name of the state of Washington without abbreviation;
- (d) Must be treated with fully reflectorized materials designed to increase visibility and legibility at night;
- (e) Must be of a size and color and show the registration period as determined by the director; and
- (f) Before July 1, 2010, may display a symbol or artwork approved by the former special license plate review board and the legislature. Beginning July 1, 2010, special license plate series approved by the department and enacted into law by the legislature may display a symbol or artwork approved by the department.

(2) **Exceptions to reflectorized materials.** License plates issued before January 1, 1968, are not required to be treated with reflectorized materials.

(3) **Dealer license plates.** License plates issued to a dealer must contain an indication that the license plates have been issued to a vehicle dealer.

(4) (a) **Furnished.** The director shall furnish to all persons making satisfactory application for a vehicle registration:

- (i) Two identical license plates each containing the license plate number; or
  - (ii) One license plate if the vehicle is a trailer, semitrailer, camper, moped, collector vehicle, horseless carriage, or motorcycle.
- (b) The director may adopt types of license plates to be used as long as the license plates are legible.

(5) (a) **Display.** License plates must be:

- (i) Attached conspicuously at the front and rear of each vehicle if two license plates have been issued;
- (ii) Attached to the rear of the vehicle if one license plate has been issued;
- (iii) Except as provided in subsection (7) (c) (ii) of this section, kept clean and uncovered and be able to be plainly seen and read at all times unless an exception in (b) of this subsection applies; and

(iv) Attached in a horizontal position at a distance of not more than four feet from the ground.

(b) (i) The Washington state patrol may grant exceptions to this subsection if the body construction of the vehicle makes compliance with this section impossible.

(ii) If the applicable requirements of (b) (iii) of this subsection are met, the display of a single license plate properly attached to a vehicle that has two license plates properly attached in accordance with (a) (i) of this subsection may be temporarily obstructed by one or more of the following devices or by the cargo the device is carrying:

- (A) A trailer hitch;

(B) A wheelchair lift or wheelchair carrier;

(C) A trailer being towed by the vehicle, provided the trailer meets any applicable trailer license plate requirements under this chapter; or

(D) A bicycle rack, ski rack, or luggage rack.

(iii) The obstruction of a single license plate under (b) (ii) or (b) (iv) of this subsection is only authorized if the following requirements are met:

(A) The device is installed according to manufacturer specifications or generally accepted installation practices; and

(B) The device or cargo the device is carrying does not prevent the license plate from being read from one or more accessible viewing angles when the vehicle is parked, except if the device is a trailer that meets the trailer license plate requirements under this chapter.

(iv) If the applicable requirements of (b) (iii) of this subsection are met, the display of a single license plate attached to a trailer in accordance with (a) (ii) of this subsection and meeting any applicable trailer license plate requirements under this chapter may be obstructed by a device for transporting a forklift used for product delivery purposes. For purposes of license plate visibility, the single trailer license plate obstructed by a device for carrying a forklift may be relocated on the trailer or the towing vehicle to a position that is more than four feet from the ground.

(6) **Change of license classification.** A person who has altered a vehicle that makes the current license plate or plates invalid for the vehicle's use shall:

(a) Surrender the current license plate or plates to the department, county auditor or other agent, or subagent appointed by the director;

(b) Apply for a new license plate or plates; and

(c) Pay a change of classification fee required under RCW 46.17.310.

(7) **Unlawful acts.** It is unlawful to:

(a) Display a license plate or plates on the front or rear of any vehicle that were not issued by the director for the vehicle;

(b) Display a license plate or plates on any vehicle that have been changed, altered, or disfigured, or have become illegible;

(c) (i) Except as provided in (c) (ii) of this subsection, use license plate holders, frames, covers, or other materials that conceal, obstruct, distort, change, alter, or make a license plate or plates illegible;

(ii) License plate frames may be used on license plates only if the frames do not obscure license tabs or identifying letters or numbers on the plates and the license plates can be plainly seen and read at all times;

(d) Operate a vehicle unless a valid license plate or plates are attached as required under this section;

(e) Transfer a license plate or plates issued under this chapter between two or more vehicles without first making application to transfer the license plates. A violation of this subsection (7) (e) is a traffic infraction subject to a fine not to exceed \$500. Any law enforcement agency that determines that a license plate or plates have been transferred between two or more vehicles shall confiscate the license plate or plates and return them to the department for nullification along with full details of the reasons for confiscation. Each vehicle identified in the transfer will be issued a new license

plate or plates upon application by the owner or owners and the payment of full fees and taxes; or

(f) Fail, neglect, or refuse to endorse the registration certificate, except as authorized under this section.

(8) **Transfer.** (a) Standard issue license plates must be replaced when ownership of the vehicle changes, pursuant to subsection

(9) (a) (i) of this section, but the registered owner may retain the license plates and transfer them to a replacement vehicle of the same use. In addition to all other taxes and fees due upon change in ownership, a registered owner wishing to keep standard issue license plates shall pay the license plate transfer fee required under RCW 46.17.200(1) (c) when applying for license plate transfer.

(b) Special license plates and personalized license plates may be treated in the same manner as described in (a) of this subsection unless otherwise limited by law.

(c) License plates issued to the state or any county, city, town, school district, or other political subdivision entitled to exemption as provided by law may be treated in the same manner as described in (a) of this subsection.

(d) License plate replacement is not required when a change in vehicle ownership is the result of one or more of the following circumstances:

(i) When adding a lienholder to the certificate of title or removing a lienholder from the certificate of title;

(ii) When a vehicle is transferred from one spouse or registered domestic partner to another;

(iii) When removing a deceased spouse or registered domestic partner from the certificate of title;

(iv) When a vehicle is transferred by gift or inheritance to one or more members of the registered owner's immediate family;

(v) When a vehicle is transferred into or out of a trust in which the registered owner or one or more immediate family members of the registered owner is the beneficiary;

(vi) When a leaseholder buys out the leased vehicle; or

(vii) When a person changes his or her name.

(9) **Replacement.** (a) Except as provided in subsection (8) (a) of this section, an owner or the owner's authorized representative must apply for a replacement license plate or plates: (i) When taking ownership of the vehicle; (ii) if the current license plate or plates assigned to the vehicle have been lost, defaced, or destroyed; or (iii) if one or both plates have become so illegible or are in such a condition as to be difficult to distinguish. An owner or the owner's authorized representative may apply for a replacement license plate or plates at any time the owner chooses. The department shall offer to owners the option of retaining the current license plate number when obtaining replacement license plates for the fee required in RCW 46.17.200(1) (b).

(b) The application for a replacement license plate or plates must:

(i) Be on a form furnished or approved by the director; and

(ii) Be accompanied by the fee required under RCW 46.17.200(1) (a).

(c) When a vehicle is sold to a vehicle dealer for resale, the application for a replacement plate or plates need not be made until the vehicle is sold by the vehicle dealer.

(d) The department shall not require the payment of any fee to replace a license plate or plates for vehicles owned, rented, or

leased by foreign countries or international bodies to which the United States government is a signatory by treaty.

(10) **Replacement—Exceptions.** The following license plates are not required to be replaced as required in subsection (9) of this section:

(a) Horseless carriage license plates issued under RCW 46.18.255 before January 1, 1987;

(b) Medal of Honor license plates issued under RCW 46.18.230;

(c) License plates for commercial motor vehicles with a gross weight greater than 26,000 pounds.

(11) **Rules.** The department may adopt rules to implement this section.

(12) **Tabs or emblems.** The director may issue tabs or emblems to be attached to license plates or elsewhere on the vehicle to signify initial registration and renewals. Renewals become effective when tabs or emblems have been issued and properly displayed. [2024 c 84 s 1; 2022 c 130 s 1. Prior: 2014 c 181 s 2; 2014 c 80 s 1; 2011 c 171 s 46; 2010 c 161 s 422.]

**Application—2014 c 80:** "This act applies to vehicle registrations that are due or become due on or after January 1, 2015." [2014 c 80 s 7.]

**Intent—Effective date—2011 c 171:** See notes following RCW 4.24.210.

**Effective date—Intent—Legislation to reconcile chapter 161, Laws of 2010 and other amendments made during the 2010 legislative session—2010 c 161:** See notes following RCW 46.04.013.