

Date of Hearing: June 26, 2023

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

Laura Friedman, Chair

SB 374 (Ashby) – As Amended June 14, 2023

SENATE VOTE: 36-0

SUBJECT: Vehicles: specialized license plates

SUMMARY: Increases the fee for the California Firefighter specialized license plate from \$35 to \$40 for each renewal registration.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Authorizes a person who is a firefighter, retired firefighter, or a surviving family member of a firefighter or retired firefighter to apply to the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) for a license plate with the words “California Firefighter” on it upon their showing of satisfactory proof that they are employed, or retired in good standing, as an officer, an employee, or a member of a public fire department or fire service. Vehicle Code (VEH) 5101.2
- 2) Allows the surviving spouse of the original firefighter applicant to retain the special license plates upon the death of the applicant and in the absence of a surviving spouse, allows a member of the deceased firefighter’s family to retain one of the special license plates as a family heirloom that is invalid for vehicle registration purposes. VEH 5101.2
- 3) Requires an additional fee of \$50 for the initial issuance of the special license plates, \$35 for the renewal or replacement of the special license plates, and \$15 for the transfer of the special license plates. VEH 5101.2
- 4) Requires the revenues of the additional fees to be deposited in the California Firefighters’ Memorial Fund, after DMV’s costs have been deducted. VEH 5101.2
- 5) Requires funds in the Firefighter’s Memorial Fund to be allocated to the California Fire Foundation for the purpose of: (Revenue and Taxation Code section (RTC) 18802
 - a) Maintenance and repair of the California Firefighters’ Memorial on the grounds of the State Capitol;
 - b) Ceremonies to honor the memory of fallen firefighters and to assist surviving loved ones; and,
 - c) An informational guide detailing survivor benefits to assist the spouses and children of fallen firefighters.

FISCAL EFFECT: According to the Senate Appropriations Committee, pursuant to Senate Rule 28.8, negligible state costs.

COMMENTS: AB 941 (Nolan), Chapter 1304, Statutes of 1994 created the “California Firefighter” specialized license plate, which generates funds for the California Firefighter’s Memorial Fund (Fund). The Fund in turn provides assistance to the California Fire Foundation, a nonprofit 501(c) (3) tax-exempt organization. The Foundation uses its resources to fund

memorial ceremonies honoring fallen firefighters, educational scholarships for surviving children of fallen firefighters, local community fire safety preparedness projects, firefighter community outreach events, and supplemental fire victim assistance programs. The Fund also pays for maintenance and repair of the California Firefighters' Memorial on the grounds of the State Capitol, among other purposes.

According to the author "SB 374 aims to increase funding for the California Fire Foundation by raising fees on the Firefighter Specialty License Plate. By doing so, we can provide more resources for the maintenance and repair of the California Firefighters' Memorial, which stands on the State Capitol grounds and honors the memory of nearly 1,400 firefighters who lost their lives in the line of duty or from job-related illnesses.

In addition to preserving the Memorial, the increased funding will allow for the continued publication of an informational guide outlining survivor benefits and scholarships for the children of fallen firefighters. The Foundation plays a critical role in supporting the families of fallen firefighters- aiding with trauma reduction, financial assistance, and grief counseling. Through SB 374, The Foundation will be able to further support the surviving families of fallen firefighters, provide assistance for memorial ceremonies, and renovate the California Firefighters' Memorial in order to ensure that all firefighters who give the ultimate sacrifice are honored. This bill serves as a testament to the selflessness of firefighters, who are willing to increase fees on themselves for the betterment of their communities and to honor the sacrifices of their peers."

Unlike most specialized license plates which are available for anyone in the state to purchase, the Firefighter plate may only be purchased by a firefighter, retired firefighter, or a surviving family member of a firefighter or retired firefighter. In fiscal year 2021-2022 14,923 individuals had a firefighter license plate, generating \$566,166.

The California Fire Chiefs Association and the Fire Districts Association, writing in support of the bill, argue "The special license program has become a well-recognized trademark for active and retired firefighters to purchase the plates and proudly display their fire service to the community. The funds are dedicated to the California Fire Foundation, a non-profit organization providing assistance to firefighters and their families. Among the duties of the Foundation is to maintain the Memorial that commemorates those firefighters who have given the ultimate sacrifice in service to California. The infusion of funds to the Foundation will allow the ongoing renovation project of the Memorial to be completed and thereby honor all of the names of those firefighters who have fallen serving all of us."

According to the California Fire Chief's Association, in 2022 more than 80 names were added to the California Firefighters Memorial on State Capitol Grounds. The Memorial has since ran out of room for additional names and will need to be expanded in order to continue to honor firefighters who have died in the line of service.

Committee comments: Several measures have gone through the Legislature this year and in years past to increase the cost of a single specialized license plate in order to raise additional revenue for the programs they fund. The committee has generally been concerned about those provisions having an adverse impact by raising those fees for individual plates but not all plates, as specialized license plates are voluntary purchases made by consumers and increasing the cost of

one plate could result in an individual opting to choose a different plate or forgo having a specialized license plate altogether.

That problem, however, is less likely in the case of this bill, as unlike other specialized license plates, this plate can only be purchased by a very limited number of Californians, nearly half of which have opted to purchase this plate. Nonetheless, it is possible that fewer fire fighters may choose to renew their plates as a result of the 14% price increase. Last fiscal year, there was enough of a drop in firefighters opting to purchase the plate that there was a \$44,000 loss to the fund. The \$5 increase would result in \$74,615 of additional revenue assuming the number of people purchasing the plate remains the same as in fiscal year 2021-2022.

Related Legislation: SB 608 (Becker) would have increased the special fees for the issuance and renewal of the “Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids” specialized license plates and would have reallocated how the funds were spent. That bill was held in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Previous Legislation:

AB 2602 (Salas of 2022) was nearly identical to SB 608. The author of that bill took amendments at the request of this committee striking the provisions increasing the fees for the issuance and renewal of the “Have a Heart, Be a Star, Help Our Kids” plate and was re-referred to Assembly Human Services and it died in that committee.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California Fire Chiefs Association
California Professional Firefighters
Fire Districts Association of California
League of California Cities

Opposition

None on file

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