



February 21, 2011

AMERICAN CIVIL
LIBERTIES UNION OF
ALASKA
1057 W. Fireweed, Suite 207
Anchorage, AK 99503
(907) 258-0044
(907) 258-0288 (fax)
WWW.AKCLU.ORG

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STUDENT ADVISOR

The Honorable Bill Wielechowski, Chair
The Honorable Joe Paskvan, Vice-Chair
Senate State Affairs Committee
Alaska State Senate
Juneau, AK 99801

via email: [Senator Bill Wielechowski@legis.state.ak.us](mailto:Senator_Bill_Wielechowski@legis.state.ak.us)
[Senator Joe Paskvan@legis.state.ak.us](mailto:Senator_Joe_Paskvan@legis.state.ak.us)

**Re: Senate Bill 16 – “Choose Life” License Plates
Constitutional Issues**

Chair Wielechowski, Vice-Chair Paskvan:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding Senate Bill 16, regarding Special Request “Choose Life” License Plates.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Alaska represents thousands of members and activists throughout the State of Alaska who seek to preserve and expand individual freedoms and civil liberties guaranteed under the United States and Alaska Constitutions. From that perspective, we wish to alert the Committee to potential constitutional issues which could arise with respect to this proposed legislation.

Government Viewpoint Neutrality Required

If a State chooses to introduce a system for creation of optional license plates, the State must have a viewpoint neutral process for determining how applications for optional license plate formats would be adopted.

For instance, a Missouri agency that regulated specialty license plates could not refuse to create a “Choose Life” license plate simply because such license plates made members of the committee uncomfortable. *Roach v. Stouffer*, 560 F.3d 860 (8th Cir. 2009).

While the license plates are theoretically “owned” by the state, these “message” plates consist of mixed government and individual speech. The plates constitute government speech, insofar as the government imposes general editorial control over the license plate content. They are individual speech insofar as a non-state group may propose a specialized plate format and the individual driver chooses to espouse the message.

Given the personal speech interests at stake, the government may not pick and choose among causes and messages it supports in adopting such optional license plates.

In a case directly on point, South Carolina adopted a “Choose Life” license plate by statute. Refusal of the state to authorize a pro-choice themed license plate constituted direct viewpoint discrimination and violated the First Amendment. *Planned Parenthood of South Carolina Inc. v. Rose*, 361 F.3d 786 (4th Cir. 2004).

Conclusion

We hope that the Senate State Affairs Committee will note the constitutional issues that can arise when “message” plates are approved, and we presume that the State of Alaska would follow constitutional mandates in establishing a process for approval of additional messages.

Please feel free to contact the undersigned should you require any additional information. We are happy to reply to any questions that may arise either through written or verbal testimony, or to answer informally any questions which Members of the Committee may have.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share our concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. A. Mittman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jeffrey Mittman
Executive Director
ACLU of Alaska

cc: Senator Albert Kookesh
Senator Kevin Meyer
Senator Catherine Giessel