

Lawmakers Pan for Gold in Plates

By John O'Brien

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SPRINGFIELD—Designer plates have been on the minds of many legislators lately, but they're not thinking about first lady Brenda Edgar's china.

They're talking about license plates. Lawmakers have offered a dozen bills calling for special license plates to honor everything from firefighters to Elvis Presley.

Rep. Clement Balanoff (D-Chicago), whose plan for an Elvis plate has made him the uncrowned king of the specialty plates, said the surge in proposals is a result of legislators trying to generate revenue.

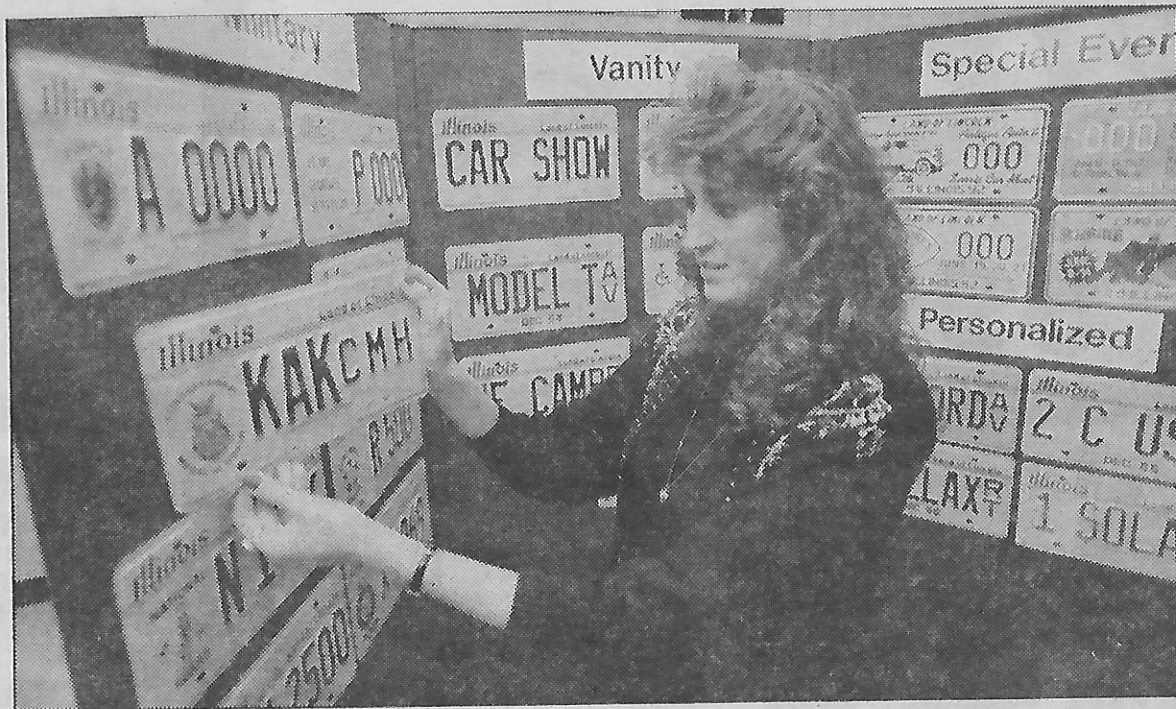
"When you look across the country, state after state has generated tremendous amounts of money" with the plates, Balanoff said. "That's what specialty license plates are all about."

While sponsors see the specialty plates as moneymakers, they are headaches for law enforcement officials and the secretary of state's office, which already have to deal with nearly 200 plate varieties.

Designer plates would cost \$15 to \$40 more than regular plates.

Money generated would be used to finance programs related to the plate's theme. Funds generated by a proposed environmental plate, for instance, would be used to help pay for state park operations.

The environmental plate, proposed by Rep. John "Phil" Novak (D-Bradley), joins Balanoff's



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Stacey Oxencis of the special plates division of the secretary of state's office in Springfield shows off the variety of Illinois plates available to drivers.

Elvis plate and a plate honoring Korean War veterans as the only measures now before lawmakers for a vote.

Still in committee are plans for plates saluting veterans, firefighters, the spouses of fallen police officers, Illinois colleges and universities, and civic and fraternal organizations.

Officials who keep track of plates and vehicles are resigned to lawmakers' fascination with special plates.

The Illinois State Police used to oppose any new varieties of plates, saying they made it harder to identify vehicles. Now, with the 187 different Illinois plates, the police have given up opposing them, State Police spokesman Mark McDonald said.

"These extras aren't going to make any difference," he said.

Mike Murphy, a spokesman for the secretary of state's office, said that if there is not sufficient demand for a designer plate, the

state loses money.

But the sponsor of the Korean War veterans plate thinks all of the specialty plate proposals prove the state should re-evaluate its system.

"We create plates down here at the drop of a hat, from the Maple Syrup Hoedown plate to one for the Springfield Air Festival," said Rep. William B. Black (R-Danville). "At some point we need to just step back and look at this whole license plate situation."