

## Questions and Answers about Iowa's License Plate Redesign

### Why are we changing the license plate design?

Early in 2017, Governor Branstad and Governor Reynolds asked us to redesign what we call the “county standard” license plates. County standard plates are the plates most of us have, that are blue and white with a silver-grey city and country image in the background.



*Sample county standard plate with city/country background*

We made the switch to this plate design in 1998, at the same time we stopped stamping letters and numbers onto license plates and started digitally printing license plates. The background has remained the same since that time, although we switched from blue to black letters in 2011 to increase contrast and legibility and reduce cost.

Although this plate design has served as well, it's become a bit dated and stale. Governor Branstad and Governor Reynolds asked us to remedy that by designing a new, updated plate that positively represents Iowa.

### What will the new license plate look like?

Our new county standard license plate will look this:



We called this design the “City and Country Reboot.” It represents an updated and more visually compelling representation of the city and country theme that is currently featured on Iowa license plates. The top blue border profiles city and country images and the bottom green border evokes growth, nature and wellness. This plate reminds us Iowa is a great place to live, wherever you choose.

### **When will the new plate design be available?**

Production of the new design will begin toward the end of March. The Iowa DOT and Iowa Prison Industries carefully monitors the plate inventory of each plate design individual county treasurers have on hand and ships new plates as their existing inventory is depleted. Once inventory of the existing plate design is depleted, individual county treasurers will begin receiving the new plate design automatically. This will mean that some counties will receive the new plate design sooner than others. It is also important to note that inventory of some specialty plates that will contain the new design may take longer to deplete than the county standard plate design. If you are anxious to receive the new design, it is suggested that you contact your county treasurer to see if they are available.

### **Will we all have to change our plates?**

No. To avoid unnecessary cost, we will not replace all of the license plates that are currently in use, but will instead phase in new plates. Vehicle owners that would normally receive a new county standard plate, such as customers that are due for a plate replacement after 10 years will receive the new design, as will customers that replace a lost or stolen plate.

One thing we did to keep Iowa plates functional and save money was to implement a ten year “rolling” replacement of license plates, starting in 2012. We studied plate longevity and found that plates tend to lose their reflectivity and legibility after about the tenth year in service. Therefore, we automatically replace your plates after 10 years. That helps us make sure our plates remain in good condition and use, but also avoids replacing plates before the end of their useful life. Because of this 10-year replacement cycle, it will take some time before all of the county standard plates currently in service in Iowa are replaced with the new design.

Iowa was something of a pioneer in this idea. States used to replace all of their plates at one time, which costs millions of dollars and ends up replacing plates that have good life in them. Other states are now following our lead.



## What if I want a new plate but I'm not due for a new one?

If you're not due for a set of replacement plates but would like to display the new design, you can request a set of replacement plates through your county treasurer's office, assuming the new plate design is available in that county. Replacement plates only cost \$5.

## I have a collegiate plate, a DNR plate, or another specialty plate. Will it change?

Collegiate plates (Iowa, Iowa State, UNI, and all of the private college plates currently available) will not change. Likewise, DNR plates (for instance, the gold finch, eagle, trout, or deer plates) and any other specialty plate that uses a background other than the current county standard background will not change – these plates have their distinct design and background and won't be affected.



*Sample collegiate plates*



*Sample DNR plate*

We do have a number of what we call special processed emblem plates – plates that have an emblem on the left side of the plate that promotes a specific organization or cause – that are produced on the county standard background, and we will begin producing those as existing inventory is depleted.



*Sample processed emblem plates*

This is also true for the new “decals” plates, which are plates authorized by the Iowa legislature and that allow a non-profit organization to produce and distribute a decal that can be affixed on the left side of the plate and that promotes the organization or its cause. You can find more information about decal plates at Approved decals can be found on our website at

<https://iowadot.gov/mvd/vehicleregistration/vehicleregistration/decals>.



*Sample decal plate*

### **May I still get a personalized plate?**

Yes, you will still be able to order personalized plates. This change only affects the design of county standard plates; it doesn't change the availability of personalized plates. You can find more information about personalized and specialty plates at <https://iowadot.gov/mvd/personalizedplates/home.aspx>.

### **Will there be any change in the numbers and letters on the plates?**

No, the configuration of the letters and numbers will still be the same – county standard plates will still have three letters and three numbers with a space between them, and personalized plates (other than on specialty plates) will still have a combination of up to seven letters and numbers, and specialty plates with processed emblems will still have two letters and three numbers (or five characters total if personalized).

### **Will the new plates still have the county name at the bottom?**

Yes. Iowa law requires that we include the county name at the bottom of license plates (other than collegiate plates), and we will continue to do that, as the design options reflect.

### **How was this design developed and selected?**



Rather than just launch a new design, both we and Governor Reynolds thought it was important to give the public a voice in the selection process. Our in-house design team took input from staff, the Governor's Office, the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, and the Iowa Economic Development Authority to develop themes and concepts that inspired more than 40 design options. Those options were narrowed to eight and then with input from Governor Reynolds narrowed down to three final designs.

Governor Reynolds released the final three designs to the public on the first day of the 2017 Iowa State Fair. Throughout the duration of the Fair (August 10 - 20) the public voted on the design they liked best, both online and directly at our state fair booth. The "City and Country Reboot" design received the most votes from the public.

### **What did it cost to develop the new designs?**

Absolutely nothing. Our in-house designers created all of the design options and art work at no cost.

### **Why didn't you offer a design that covered the whole plate, like other states?**

Some states have implemented license plates that have images or designs that cover the entire plate, and in fact we received some very generous and creative suggestions from the public that suggested "whole plate" designs. As we suggested new designs the one thing we had to keep in mind was the essential purpose of a license plate, which is to help law enforcement and others clearly read the letters and numbers that identify the vehicle. Full color and detailed graphics obscure the letters and numbers on the plate and reduce contrast, which makes it harder to read the plate when necessary.

The American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA) maintains license plate design standards that are intended to make sure license plates are recognizable and legible. In general, they recommend a high degree of contrast between the letters and numbers and the surrounding background. They also recommend avoiding strong images in the background that compete with the letters and numbers. That's why we developed designs that have stronger graphics at the top and bottom but are mostly white or very light in color around the letters and numbers. This also drove the decision to continue to use black text. This let us create options that represented Iowa in a positive manner but still maintained the ability to easily recognize and read the plates, ultimately keeping us all safer.



Another thing that influenced our design is the number of specialty plates that must be accommodated within the standard design. As discussed below, we have 40 different specialty plates, plus new decal plates, that are produced on the standard background which need space for a graphic image on the left side of the plate (to the left of the plate letters and numbers). To make sure those images remain clear and visible, we needed to keep that space free of competing images and colors. That's another reason we could not offer or accept designs that covered the whole plate.

### **Who makes our plates?**

Iowa Prison Industries makes our license plates at its penitentiary in Anamosa.

### **How many license plates do we make every year?**

On average we make about 1.3 million plates per year. That covers about 1.2 million large plates and 888,000 small plates.

### **How many county standard plates are currently in service in Iowa?**

The vast majority of plates that are currently in service in Iowa are county standard plates. We currently have about 4.4 million plates in service, and of those, just under 4.2 million are county standard plates.

### **What does it cost to make a set of plates?**

It costs \$3.64 to manufacture a set of plates.

### **What does it cost each year to produce plates?**

It costs about \$2.3 million per year to produce license plates. License plate costs are funded via a statutory allocation from the Road Use Tax Fund established under Iowa Code 312.2.



### **Why do we have two license plates? Wouldn't it save money to have only one?**

There are states that only require a vehicle to display one license plate, but Iowa law still requires that most vehicles (with the exception of motorcycles, autocycles, trailers and semi-truck tractors) display two plates. Although the legislature on a number of occasions has considered proposals that would eliminate the second plate, they have failed to gain approval, primarily because law enforcement has indicated it would diminish the ability of law enforcement and others to identify vehicles and individuals that are lost, wanted, or involved in criminal activity. Additionally, although switching to one plate would reduce overall plate production costs by reducing the total materials used and produced, it would not, as you might assume, cut license plate costs in half. That's in part because we already have certain vehicle types that only display one plate (as noted above), but primarily because there are fixed costs associated with license plate production (for instance contracts for printers and other production hardware and software) that remain the same regardless of the number of plates produced. We will continue to produce two plates as required unless and until Iowa law changes.

### **Where can I get more info about Iowa license plates?**

You can get information regarding all Iowa license plates types, fees, eligibility and more on our website at <https://iowadot.gov/mvd/vehicleregistration/vehicleregistration/plates/plates>.

