

Editorial: Restore faith in license plate program

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California's specialty license plates should not dangle a promise that government does not keep. Drivers buy the plates to support a variety of causes, but a new audit found slipshod oversight of the resulting income. The Legislature needs to ensure that state agencies handle the money properly, and use the funds as drivers expected.

The state auditor last week released a report on the state's specialty license plates. California offers 11 types of specialized license plates for an extra charge, with the money going to a variety of programs. The most common is the personalized license plate, which supports environmental protection. But there are plates that support the arts, help provide scholarships, aid veterans and help restore Lake Tahoe, among other causes. The specialty plates have raised more than \$200 million over the past two decades.

Auditors looked at just two of the specialty programs: the environmental funds from three types of special plates, plus money from a memorial license plate commemorating the Sept. 11 attacks. Legislators ordered the audit after a series of news stories last year reporting lax management of the money from the specialized plates.

The results only raise questions about the state's handling of the specialty plate programs. The audit discovered that the Department of Motor Vehicles undercharged drivers for some of the plates, and failed to collect some fees in other cases. Altogether, the auditor said the specialty plate funds missed out on \$22.2 million over the past two fiscal years.

But the report also found that state agencies used the license plate money in ways that had little connection to the programs' stated purpose. The memorial license plate, for example, is supposed to provide funding to help fight terrorism. But the California Emergency Management Agency spent more than \$98,000 of the money over the past three fiscal years on office furniture and supplies, travel expenses and other uses unrelated to stopping terrorism.

The auditor could not determine whether another \$1.3 million in license plate money during that period went for the programs the special plates supposedly support. State agencies could not provide proper documentation that some expenses were legitimate uses of the antiterrorism and environmental funds. And no one knows how far the lax oversight extends, because the audit only studied two license plate funds.

Such careless handling of public money undermines trust in state government, and makes taxpayers skeptical when government asks for additional taxes and fees. Drivers who thought their special plates were aiding favored causes now cannot be sure – which only irritates people and discourages participation in those programs.

The audit recommends what should already be obvious: The DMV should improve collection of the specialty plate fees, and state agencies should ensure proper use of the money.

State agencies should not need reminders of such basic responsibilities. Repaying drivers' civic impulses with sloppiness is an insult, not acceptable practice.