

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6209

As Reported By Senate Committee On:
Transportation, February 1, 1996

Title: An act relating to special license plates for vehicles registered to foreign organizations.

Brief Description: Authorizing special license plates for vehicles registered to the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office.

Sponsors: Senators Wojahn, Snyder, McDonald and Sellar.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Transportation: 1/30/96, 2/1/96 [DPS].

SENATE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 6209 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass.

Signed by Senators Owen, Chair; Heavey, Vice Chair; Goings, Haugen, Morton, Oke, Prince, Rasmussen, Schow, Sellar, Thibaudeau and Wood.

Staff: Jennifer Joly (786-7305)

Background: The Department of Licensing (DOL) may issue special license plates to every honorary consul or official representative of a foreign country, duly licensed and holding an exequatur issued by the U.S. Department of State. The applicant is required to pay the regular license fee and the motor vehicle excise tax before the special license plate is issued by DOL.

The issuance of diplomatic license plates is considered a way of showing the consuls or official representatives the importance of their international relationship with the United States.

Representatives of the government of Taiwan, through the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office, enjoy many of the privileges afforded to other foreign diplomatic residents; however, there are no provisions allowing the Department of Licensing to issue them special license plates.

Summary of Substitute Bill: The Department of Licensing (DOL) is authorized to issue special license plates for passenger vehicles that are owned or leased by officers of a "Recognized Foreign Organization" at no charge. The applicant for a special license plate is exempt from payment of the regular license fees, the state motor vehicle excise tax, and any county vehicle license fees. The license plates must bear the words "Foreign Organization" to distinguish them from diplomatic license plates.

The special license plates may be transferred to another vehicle; however, DOL must be notified of the transfer. License plates that are removed but not transferred to another vehicle are to be immediately forwarded to DOL to be destroyed. When the owner or lessee is relieved of his or her foreign organization duties, the license plates must be returned to the DOL and regular plates issued.

"Recognized foreign organization" means an instrumentality established by a foreign government recognized by the United States before January 1, 1979, and that is without official representation or diplomatic relations with the United States.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill: A new section is created in RCW 46.16, rather than amending RCW 46.16.371, which provides special plates for honorary consul and foreign government representatives. The rationale behind this amendment is that the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office does not meet the criteria for an honorary consul plate. For example, they do not hold an exequatur issued by the State Department.

Language providing that the distinctive license plates extend the "same privileges, exemptions, and courtesies enjoyed by the consulates general of foreign governments in Washington" is removed to forgo potential constitutional problems. Namely, state law may not conflict with U.S. treaties.

The Taipei Economic and Cultural Office is not specifically named, rather foreign governments recognized by the United States before January 1, 1979, and that are without official representation or diplomatic relations with the United States, are eligible for foreign organization plates.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 26, 1996.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: Taiwan is Washington State's fifth largest trading partner. Major Washington exports to Taiwan include airplanes, apples and wheat. Additionally, the world's largest shipping company, Evergreen Shipping, Inc., headquartered in Taiwan, has operations at the ports of Seattle and Tacoma. The Taipei Economic and Culture Office deserves recognition via a foreign organization license plate.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: PRO: Senator Wojahn, prime sponsor; Katharine Chang, Robert Chen, Taipei Economic and Cultural Office; K.C. Chen, Seattle-Kaohsiung Sister City; Paul Barden, WA Taiwan Sister State Assn.; Sharon Wong, Taipei Economic/Cultural Committee.