

Lawmakers could put specialty plates on fast lane

Rhode Islanders love to show off their sports teams, their special causes, state locations and their colleges, so it's no wonder legislators have approved the issuance of "charity plates" to groups ranging from the Boy Scouts to Providence College and the **Saltwater Anglers**.

But while these organizations have gained legislative approval of their automobile plates and hundreds have sent in their deposits, you won't see a friar, the Gaspee, the arch at Rocky Point or a striped bass on a license plate.

That's because these organizations haven't filled 600 pre-orders for the Department of Motor Vehicles to produce the plates.

That could all change this fall, if the Rhode Island Senate passes a bill approved by the House earlier this year, and it is signed by the governor.

Introduced by **Rep. Evan Shanley** of Warwick, and after revisions worked out at the urging of **Speaker K. Joseph Shekarchi**, the current law would be amended for the DMV to produce the charity plates with 150 pre-paid orders provided the non-profit pay the state upfront what it would have received if there were 600 pre-paid orders.

But at this point, it's not known if the Senate will consider the legislation when it is expected to reconvene in September.

In a recent interview, Senate Majority Leader Michael McCaffrey said senators are expected to act on judicial appointments next month, but there's no guarantee they will consider on bills sent over by the House prior to its adjournment. If that happens, those who have fought to get plates to those who have paid for them would need to remount their campaign next year.

That could be the final straw for some organizations.

Here are the stories of just a few of the hundreds of Rhode Islanders who have paid \$42.50 for a charity plate and have yet to get it. (edited for brevity)

Conservation, joy of fishing

For some organizations, if the amendment to the legislation lowering the preorders to 150 doesn't pass, it might be time to pull the plug.

Steve Medeiros, executive director for the **Rhode Island Saltwater Anglers**, said he's had "a really rough time getting to 600." The organization currently has 177 plates ordered over the last three years.

"People signed up in the beginning, but grew tired of waiting. If we didn't have to give out refunds, we'd be well over 200 by now," he said.

Medeiros is confident that "once the plate begins appearing, you're going to see all kinds of people come in and ask for it. Many people don't know this plate is available unless they're

part of our organization."

The Saltwater Anglers plate features a large leaping striped bass, the Rhode Island state fish.

"Every fisherman wants to catch a striped bass; it's the most sought after fish in Rhode Island, and probably up and down the coast," Medeiros said. "I just wish the head of the DMV would have a little sympathy for charities like ours. It would be a shame, but we're very close to just giving up."

The Saltwater Anglers host a number of service projects to benefit Rhode Island waters, like repairing fishing ladders, working with the DEM on nature conservancy efforts, and sponsoring Take-A-Kid-Fishing Day, an event that introduces kids aged 7 to 13 to local mentors who teach them how to fish.

"The work that we do is charity work, for all fisherpeople in the state," said **Rich Hittinger**, First Vice

President for the organization, in a brief interview last week.

Hittinger added that the organization "has helped fund some of the work that the DEM has had a hard time coming up with money for," like fishing signage.

Hittinger is hopeful that the legislation to lower the ordering threshold to 150 will pass. He said the organization would put forward the money, as long as legislators keep the provision that the money eventually returns to the organization.

Otherwise, the Salt Water Anglers would owe refunds as the specialty plate project would be over.

"For me and others in the state, the plate means that Rhode Island is a great place to fish," he said. "I love fishing in RI. If we've got these plates on the streets where people can see them, they're more likely to purchase one."

Pandemic challenges

For the **Gaspee Days** Committee, the jury is still out on whether to end the project or not.

"The pandemic of course put us back a year," shared **Gina Dooley**, president of the Gaspee Days Committee. "Using social media hasn't been the same. We've advertised on Facebook, NextDoor, and hung posters throughout the village. It brings in a handful of orders here and there, but not the numbers we need."

She said that the committee's executive board hasn't decided whether to end the project or not, as they're waiting to see what the Senate's decision will be.

Dooley didn't share the number of orders received thus far, but did say they were "a ways away from 600, but if we need 150, then we'll be fine."

Other organizations taking preorders include the Rocky Point Foundation, Autism Awareness, Boston Bruins Foundation, Boy Scouts of America, #DStrong, Providence College Alumni and the RI Day of Portugal.

