

§ 20-39.1. Publicly owned vehicles to be marked; private license plates on publicly owned vehicles.

(a) Except as otherwise provided in this section, the executive head of every department of State government and every county, institution, or agency of the State shall mark every motor vehicle owned by the State, county, institution, or agency with a statement that the vehicle belongs to the State, county, institution, or agency. The requirements of this subsection are complied with if:

- (1) The vehicle has imprinted on the license plate, above the license number, the words "State Owned" and the vehicle has affixed to the front the words "State Owned";
- (2) In the case of a county, the vehicle has painted or affixed on its side a circle not less than eight inches in diameter showing a replica of the seal of the county; or
- (3) In the case of vehicles assigned to members of the Council of State, the vehicle has imprinted on the license plate the license number assigned to the appropriate member of the Council of State pursuant to G.S. 20-79.5(a); a member of the Council of State shall not be assessed any registration fee if the member elects to have a State-owned motor vehicle assigned to the member designated by the official plate number.

(b) A motor vehicle used by any State or county officer or official for transporting, apprehending, or arresting persons charged with violations of the laws of the United States or the laws of this State is not required to be marked as provided in subsection (a) of this section. The Commissioner may lawfully provide private license plates to local, State, or federal departments or agencies for use on publicly owned or leased vehicles used for those purposes. Private license plates issued under this subsection shall be issued on an annual basis and the records of issuance shall be maintained in accordance with the provisions of G.S. 20-56.

(c) A motor vehicle used by a county for transporting day or residential facility clients of area mental health, developmental disabilities, and substance abuse authorities established under Article 4 of Chapter 122C of the General Statutes is not required to be marked as provided in subsection (a) of this section. The Commissioner may lawfully provide private license plates to counties for use on publicly owned or leased vehicles used for that purpose. Private license plates issued under this subsection shall be issued on an annual basis and the records of issuance shall be maintained in accordance with the provisions of G.S. 20-56.

(c1) A motor vehicle used by the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services exclusively for Meat and Poultry compliance officers to conduct inspections is not required to be marked as provided in subsection (a) of this section. The Commissioner may lawfully provide private license plates to the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services for use on publicly owned or leased vehicles used for this purpose. Private license plates issued under this subsection shall be issued on an annual basis and the records of issuance shall be maintained in accordance with the provisions of G.S. 20-56.

(d) For purposes of this section, the term "private license plate" refers to a license plate that would normally be issued to a private party and therefore lacks any markings indicating that it has been assigned to a publicly owned vehicle. "Confidential" license plates are a specialized form of private license plate for which a confidential registration has been authorized under subsection (e) of this section. "Fictitious" license plates are a specialized form of private license plate for which a fictitious registration has been issued under subsection (f) or (g) of this section.

(e) Upon approval and request of the Director of the State Bureau of Investigation, the Commissioner shall issue confidential license plates to local, State, or federal law enforcement agencies, the Department of Public Safety, the Department of Adult Correction, agents of the Internal Revenue Service, and agents of the Department of Defense in accordance with the

provisions of this subsection. Applicants in these categories shall provide satisfactory evidence to the Director of the State Bureau of Investigation of the following:

- (1) The confidential license plate requested is to be used on a publicly owned or leased vehicle that is primarily used for transporting, apprehending, or arresting persons charged with violations of the laws of the United States or the State of North Carolina;
- (2) The use of a confidential license plate is necessary to protect the personal safety of an officer or for placement on a vehicle used primarily for surveillance or undercover operations; and
- (3) The application contains an original signature of the head of the requesting agency or department or, in the case of a federal agency, the signature of the senior ranking officer for that agency in this State.

Confidential license plates issued under this subsection shall be issued on an annual basis and the Division shall maintain a separate registration file for vehicles bearing confidential license plates. That file shall be confidential for the use of the Division and is not a public record within the meaning of Chapter 132 of the General Statutes. Upon the annual renewal of the registration of a vehicle for which a confidential status has been established under this section, the registration shall lose its confidential status unless the agency or department supplies the Director of the State Bureau of Investigation with information demonstrating that an officer's personal safety remains at risk or that the vehicle is still primarily used for surveillance or undercover operations at the time of renewal.

(f) The Commissioner may to the extent necessary provide law enforcement officers of the Division on special undercover assignments with motor vehicle operator's licenses and motor vehicle license plates under assumed names, using false or fictitious addresses. The Commissioner shall be responsible for the request for issuance and use of such licenses and license plates, and may direct the immediate return of any license or license plate issued pursuant to this subsection.

(g) The Commissioner may, upon the request of the Director of the State Bureau of Investigation and to the extent necessary, lawfully provide local, State, and federal law enforcement officers on special undercover assignments and to agents of the Department of Defense with motor vehicle drivers licenses and motor vehicle license plates under assumed names, using false or fictitious addresses. Fictitious license plates shall only be used on publicly owned or leased vehicles. A request for fictitious licenses and license plates by a local, State or federal law enforcement agency or department or by the Department of Defense shall be made in writing to the Director of the State Bureau of Investigation and shall contain an original signature of the head of the requesting agency or department or, in the case of a federal agency, the signature of the senior ranking officer for that agency in this State.

Prior to the issuance of any fictitious license or license plate, the Director of the State Bureau of Investigation shall make a specific written finding that the request is justified and necessary. The Director shall maintain a record of all such licenses, license plates, assumed names, false or fictitious addresses, and law enforcement officers using the licenses or license plates. That record shall be confidential and is not a public record within the meaning of Chapter 132 of the General Statutes. The Director shall request the immediate return of any license or registration that is no longer necessary.

Licenses and license plates provided under this subsection shall expire six months after initial issuance unless the Director of the State Bureau of Investigation has approved an extension in writing. The head of the local, State, or federal law enforcement agency or the Department of Defense shall be responsible for the use of the licenses and license plates and shall return them immediately to the Director for cancellation upon either (i) their expiration, (ii) request of the Director of the State Bureau of Investigation, or (iii) request of the Commissioner. Failure to

return a license or license plate issued pursuant to this subsection shall be punished as a Class 2 misdemeanor. At no time shall the number of valid licenses issued under this subsection exceed two hundred nor shall the number of valid license plates issued under this subsection exceed one hundred twenty-five unless the Director determines that exceptional circumstances justify exceeding those amounts. However, fictitious licenses and license plates issued to special agents of the State Bureau of Investigation, State alcohol law enforcement agents, and the Department of Defense shall not be counted against the limitation on the total number of fictitious licenses and plates established by this subsection and shall be renewable annually.

(h) No private, confidential, or fictitious license plates issued under this section shall be used on privately owned vehicles under any circumstances.

(i) The Commissioner shall administer the issuance of private plates for publicly owned vehicles under the provisions of this section to ensure strict compliance with those provisions. The Division shall report to the Joint Legislative Commission on Governmental Operations by January 1 and July 1 of each year on the total number of private plates issued to each agency, and the total number of fictitious licenses and plates issued by the Division. (2001-424, s. 6.14(a); 2001-424, s. 6.14(b); 2001-487, ss. 53, 54; 2003-152, ss. 3, 4; 2003- 284, ss. 6.5(a), (b); 2004-124, s. 6.5(a), (b); 2005-276, s. 6.18(a); 2011-145, s. 19.1(g); 2017-108, s. 10; 2023-121, s. 16(f).)