

American Atheists Leader Wins Fight for 'ATHEIST' License Plate

Every state's Department of Motor Vehicles routinely rejects applications for vanity license plates that are deemed offensive or in poor taste, but officials in New Jersey apparently didn't have the stomach for a high-volume fight over an application for an "ATHEIST" plate.

New Jersey's Motor Vehicle Commission initially rejected the application from David Silverman, president of the Cranford, American Atheists, as "objectionable."

When Silverman called the MVC to lodge a complaint, he was told the word is "offensive." A legal defense fund was set up and Silverman readied for battle, but on Wednesday, Silverman was told he could have the plate.

"*Atheist*" is not an offensive or objectionable word anymore than the word *Jew* or *Christian* or *man* or *woman* is," Silverman said.

"It is a common noun, it is in the dictionary and it is not only allowed in multiple other states, the word is used on dog tags for the U.S. government. It is who and what I am."

MVC officials, who declined to comment, cited a "clerical error," according to Silverman.

New Jersey maintains a list of 1,085 words (or variations of them) that are banned from vanity plates, and any plate can be rejected at the discretion of department employees. While BOOBIES and KKK are included on the list, ATHEIST—in any form—is not.

In fact, New Jersey has issued an "ATHEIST" plate before. The

retired plate is hanging on the wall in Silverman's office, sent in by a supporter years ago. And the state approved Silverman's previous vanity plate, "BLASFMR." Minnesota, Alabama and Florida, among others, have all issued "ATHEIST" plates.

Religion-themed vanity plates frequently get the nod from state officials. Georgia has approved "GOD4EVR" and "44JESUS," while people in Vermont are driving around behind "PSALM48" and "JN36TN." The last is a reference to a Bible verse, and the owner of the plate won the right to bear it in a federal appeals court after it was rejected by local officials.