

SUBJECT: Issuing Legion of Merit specialty license plates

COMMITTEE: Defense Affairs and State-Federal Relations — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 7 ayes — Corte, Escobar, Garcia, Hodge, Merritt, Noriega, Raymond
0 nays
2 absent — Herrero, Moreno

WITNESSES: For — None
Against — None
On — Mike Craig, Texas Department of Transportation

BACKGROUND: HB 2971 by Harper-Brown, enacted by the 78th Legislature in 2003, added subchapter D to Transportation Code, ch. 504 to govern the issuance of specialty license plates for the military. Among those eligible for specialty license plates are veterans of recent major conflicts; surviving spouses of certain veterans; members or former members of the U.S. military; and current members of the Texas National Guard, Texas State Guard, and reserves in the U.S. military. Honors earning special mention on the face of the plate include recipients of the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Purple Heart.

Fees for issuing plates vary. Veterans of recent major conflicts, reserves in the U.S. Armed Forces, and members of the Texas National Guard and Texas State Guard are not charged for a specialty license plate. Those seeking license plates honoring general service in a branch of the military or auxiliary service must pay \$10 for the first set of plates and \$15 for each additional set of plates. For those who have been honored with an extraordinary service medal, such as a Distinguished Flying Cross or Purple Heart, the charge for the first set of specialty plates is \$3 and \$15 for each additional set.

DIGEST: HB 2282 would add Transportation Code, sec. 504.316 to allow the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to create a specialty license plate for recipients of the Legion of Merit medal. The plates would include the words “Legion of Merit” and would cost \$10 for the first set and \$15 for each additional set.

This bill would take effect September 1, 2007.

SUPPORTERS SAY: HB 2282 would include a military honor inadvertently omitted when the 78th Legislature created license plates honoring achievement in military combat in 2003. The Legion of Merit is the sixth highest military decoration the United States issues and is granted to members of the U.S. Armed Forces for “exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services and achievements.” This honor is actually of greater eminence than two honors — the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Flying Cross — that already are recognized through issuance of specialty license plates.

OPPONENTS SAY: The fees for the Legion of Merit plates should match the fees assessed other recipients of medals honoring extraordinary service. Recipients of seven other medals each pay \$3 for their first set of plates, not the \$10 proposed for the Legion of Merit plate. Accordingly, the bill should reduce the price at least for the first set of plates, especially because this honor ranks above two honors eligible for a \$3 plate — the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Flying Cross.

NOTES: According to the fiscal note, the fees in HB 2282 would result in an annual gain to the state highway fund of \$1,750 beginning in fiscal 2008. The Legislative Budget Board projects that TxDOT could absorb the costs of issuing the plates within its existing resources.