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Unscientific poll shows most folks don't like new Md. plates

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If Francis Scott Key was overwhelmed by the majesty of bombs bursting in air while the flag was still there 196 years ago, many people seemed less captivated by a depiction of that moment that debuted Monday as Maryland's standard-issue license plate.



Those who said they preferred the old black-and-white plate were unimpressed with the new rendition. (Courtesy of The Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration)

The plate shows Old Glory flying over Fort McHenry as a couple of bombs explode to the right and left of a top title "Maryland," the words "War of 1812" directly beneath it and a bottom line with the [Web site of the 1812 bicentennial commission](#). Never mind that Key penned his poem in 1814.

License-plate critics are neither a professional nor an organized group, but they know what they like. An entirely [unscientific poll on The Washington Post's Web site](#) found that 86 percent of respondents were unimpressed. Eight percent thought the new plate was beautiful.

"We looked at the poll," said Bill Pencek, director of the Maryland War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission. "It's a great country. Everybody is entitled to their opinion."

Those who said they would prefer to stay with the old black-and-white plate, the standard since 1986, were unimpressed with the new rendition, which shows the flag waving above two brick structures that might have been factories or school buildings, as well as Fort McHenry.

"The design is directly taken from the way the ramparts looked," Pencek said.

Then he went on to explain how it was selected and the political nuances that must be considered when changing a license plate.

The state commission, which Pencek directs, approached the [Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration](#) about creating a license plate that would draw attention to the coming bicentennial.

At the same time, the commission had hired a design consultant to create a multipurpose logo for the bicentennial and the related [Star-Spangled Banner Trail](#), which is operated by the National Park Service.

"There was a sort of method to the madness," Pencek said. "We didn't want to have 15 different looks, depending on the application. We were trying to brand the flag."

There was another issue when it came to the plate.

The standard-issue plate competes with two other Maryland plates that each cost an additional \$20 initially and \$10 more each year. One shows a great heron and the other a farm scene. The additional charges support the [Chesapeake Bay Trust](#) and the [Maryland Agricultural Education Foundation](#).

Although many people purchase license plates to help fund the organizations' efforts, there are those who order plates just because they like the way it looks.

If the standard-issue 1812 plate were the most beautiful of the three, it could cost the bay trust and agricultural foundation much-needed money.

"We didn't want to compete with the other background plates," Pencek said. "There was an intention to be beautiful, but not more beautiful than the bay plate or the farm plate."

The 1812 plate will be issued as standard -- no added charges -- until 2015, when the black-and-white model will return.

People who have the black-and-white plates can retain them and transfer them to newly purchased vehicles.