Query by Drew Moholland of WBZ NewsRadio1030. He is doing a story on vanity license plates and wants to know why someone might want one.

Comments. First of all, I don't have a vanity plate, so I'm speaking as an observer, not an owner.

Vanity plates on motor vehicles are an interesting psychological and cultural phenomenon. When you think of them, at least two questions come to mind: why do people get them and what are the effects on people.

There are three main reasons why people get vanity plates and they follow logically from a benign nuance of the word "vanity." That is, they serve to increase a person's self esteem. First of all, when the name of the vehicle owner is on the plate, there is a feeling of being out there in the public view and getting personal attention or in being witty with a humorous message. And that kind of attention can make some people feel good about who they are. Second, there may be a plate that associates the owner with a person, place, or group of high social standing and we know that identification is one of the most often used and one of the most effective ego-support methods. Someone may have a Red Sox (RS) vanity plate and feel like almost being a member of the team. At least this was true last year when the Sox were champs. Third, the plate owner may want to promote a cause, such as greening the planet -- GoGreen -- or champion social values with "FREEDOM" or "LIBERTY."

In addition to these motivations for vanity plates, there is the interesting question as to what effects they have. There are at least three. Vanity plates are a win-win-win phenomenon. Owners win because of promoting their name or putting on display their wit and sense of humor. Viewer-drivers win because they see something novel or funny and are treated to creative thinking, all of which breaks the boredom and stress of driving in traffic. Society wins because the government has extra tax money to support worthwhile projects.
It has been suggested that vanity plates might cluster in some neighborhoods. If so, the question arises as to why. Two C's tell the story. On the one hand, there may be a community spirit -- hey, let's all do it and show that we are real neighbors. On the other hand there may be competition and jealousy -- if John across the street can have one, so can I. You might think of this need to keep up with a neighbor as similar to a phenomenon described by Freud and call it vanity plate envy.

There is one caveat with vanity plates. They can be in your face with a crude or vulgar message. In this case, the plate owner is revealing life dissatisfaction and a chip on the shoulder. It is surprising that these vanity plates exist, since they should be screened by authorities that issue them. Make no mistake -- freedom of expression is a sacred value in our society and it should be with vanity plates. But remember -- your right to swing your fist ends at the tip of my nose.

In conclusion, most vanity plates serve to make their owners feel good about themselves and brighten up the lives of those who view them. As such, vanity plates are an interesting addition to our culture.