Rhode Island may ditch Mr. Potato Head license plates

Rhode Islanders have long been able to choose Mr. Potato Head for their specialty license plates

BY KIMBERLEE KRUESI
ASSOCIATED PRESS

PAWTUCKET, R.I. — It's been no small potatoes that Rhode Islanders have been able to choose the image of Mr. Potato Head as a specialty license plate for decades.

Yet with Hasbro's decision to move its headquarters from the smallest state in the U.S. to Boston, two lawmakers say it's time to hash out whether Rhode Island should continue promoting one of the company's most iconic characters.

Under the proposal introduced earlier this month, Rhode Island's Division of Motor Vehicles would stop providing Mr. Potato Head as an option for a specialty license plate. Currently the plate costs around $40, with half of that amount going to help support the Rhode Island Community Food Bank.

Rep. Brian Newberry, a Republican from North Smithfield, said in an email that he filed the legislation because Hasbro leaving the state will cause "untold economic harm and loss of tax revenue."

"There is no reason we should be advertising their products on our license plates," Newberry said. "It may seem trivial compared to many other things but it's a matter of self-respect."

Mr. Potato Head license plates were first issued in 2002 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the beloved toy, which notably has appeared in the " Toy Story " films. The plates include a small image of Mr. Potato Head holding a sign of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank and "help end hunger" at the bottom of the plate.

"The license plate started at a time when Mr. Potato Head was all over the state and was having a moment," said Kate MacDonald, spokesperson for the food bank, which has received nearly $60,000 over the years due to the plate. "And while it has tapered off over the years, it's been a steady way for people to contribute."

An email was sent to Hasbro seeking comment. The toy company announced last year that it would be moving to Boston by the end of 2026 after operating in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, for nearly 70 years.

Lew Pryeor, who helps collect and distribute food donations to hungry Rhode Islanders, said he was upset when he heard about Newberry's bill.

"My concern is, any cuts into the food programs is gonna affect some people," said Pryeor, who lives just north of Providence, the state capital, and often sees people of different backgrounds who need help finding a warm meal.

"For him to say that he doesn't like the plates, well, that's your prerogative," he added. "Don't buy them. If it's making money for the state, let it."

Mr. Potato Head has been around since the 1950s, when the original toy didn't come with a plastic potato. Instead, kids had to supply their own vegetable to poke eyes, a nose or mustache into.

Notably, Mr. Potato Head was the first toy advertised on television in 1952. A Mrs. Potato Head was launched in 1953, followed by brother Spud, sister Yam, and various pets and accessories, according to the National Museum of Play.

Hasbro adopted a plastic spud after new government regulations prevented certain toys from having pointed sharp edges, as well as complaints about children playing with rotting vegetables.

Stew Milne | AP Photo

Above: A Mr. Potato Head statue stands outside the Hasbro, Inc. headquarters Oct. 12, 2000 in Pawtucket, R.I. **Below:** A Mr. Potato Head specialty license plate is displayed on a vehicle Thursday in Pawtucket, R.I.

Zillow accused of referral monopoly, steering homebuyers to its lenders

BY ALEXIS WEISEND
THE SEATTLE TIMES
(TNS)

The lawsuit filed Friday in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Washington comes as Zillow defends itself against other lawsuits filed by homeowners alleging similar practices.

Stephanie Dupuis, owner of the Dupuis team, claims in the lawsuit that Zillow overcharged her Silverdale, Washington, agency on commission fees and later retaliated after she refused to steer clients toward the home loans program.

The Dupuis Team receives referrals from Zillow through a program called Preferred Agent, which connects potential buyers to agents when they request to tour a property.

Despite the program being an essential source of business for the agency, the team has struggled with "substantial" membership costs and stipulations, according to the lawsuit.

Dupuis' attorney, Ryan McDevitt with the law firm Keller Rohrback, claims in the lawsuit that Zillow flexes its monopoly power to charge excessive commission fees of up to 40% when the industry norm is 25%.

"Agents are effectively forced to do business with Zillow because of its vast market power…" McDevitt wrote.

In a statement Tuesday, a Zillow spokesperson said its referral fees are consistent with industry practices and do not prevent buyers from negotiating fees with their agents.

"This complaint tells a one-sided story that does not reflect how Zillow Preferred partners serve buyers or how we work with real estate agents," the spokesperson said.

Additionally, the lawsuit claims the Dupuis Team saw a drop in referrals after Zillow ramped up pressure on agents to push their clients toward its lending business, Zillow Home Loans.

By integrating its home lending with an agent program, Zillow has seen purchase loan origination volume increase 2.6 times, according to the company's 2024 annual report.

Dupuis claims that she had to sign up for another program that gives lenders access to client information, or be kicked out of the Preferred Agent program.

She worried the program would "compromise her duties to clients by divulging confidential information," according to the lawsuit, but was forced to participate in the program to keep receiving Zillow's connections.

Dupuis' attorney, Ryan McDevitt with the law firm Keller Rohrback, claims in the lawsuit that Zillow flexes its monopoly power to charge excessive commission fees of up to 40% when the industry norm is 25%.

Still, she would not pressure her clients to choose one lender over another, according to the lawsuit.

"Based on Ms. Dupuis's concerns with Zillow's practices and respect for her duties to clients, she and her team refused to steer clients toward (Zillow Home Loans)," McDevitt wrote.

Due to the Dupuis Team's low Zillow Home Loan pre-approvals rates, Zillow capped the number of connections the agency would get per month. Zillow also terminated her access to another product that enhances the visibility of listings, the lawsuit claims.

The lawsuit alleges that Zillow violated state and federal antitrust law and seeks a class action status for all United States residents who were enrolled in Zillow's Premier, Preferred or Flex Agent programs. It requests unspecified financial compensation and for Zillow to give up any profits gained from the practices.

Dupuis and her attorney declined to comment.

The Zillow spokesperson said consumers are always in control of which agent and lender they work with, and that Zillow supports agents who deliver strong outcomes for buyers by sharing clear information and helping them understand what they can afford.

"We will defend ourselves against these claims, while we stay focused on delivering a better real estate experience for buyers, sellers, renters and the professionals who serve them," the spokesperson said.

The complaint is the latest in a flurry of legal challenges that have slammed Zillow within the last year.

In September, a homebuyer who used a Zillow agent filed a lawsuit, claiming the company illegally tricks homebuyers into working with its agents who owe a large chunk of their commission to Zillow — a transaction not disclosed to homebuyers.

In November, another homebuyer sued Zillow for allegedly pressuring her to take out a home loan through Zillow, which her agent led her to believe was her only lending option, the lawsuit claims.

Zillow, which says it accounts for two-thirds of monthly unique visits to real estate websites, has also been accused of anticompetitive actions.

Last fall, the Federal Trade Commission as well as five other states, including Washington, sued Zillow and Redfin for allegedly conspiring to eliminate competition for rental housing listings. The lawsuits came months after the companies had announced a $100 million deal for Zillow to become the exclusive provider of multifamily rental listings on Redfin.

Zillow has denied any wrongdoing.

TikTok seals deal to operate in the US after years of drama

BY ALEXANDRA S. LEVINE
BLOOMBERG NEWS
(TNS)

TikTok and its Chinese parent ByteDance Ltd. have closed a long-awaited deal to transfer parts of its U.S. operations to American investors, securing the popular video app's future in the U.S. and avoiding a nationwide ban.

The social media company has officially established a U.S. entity with three managing investors: Oracle Corp., private equity firm Silver Lake Management LLC, and Abu Dhabi-based investment company MGX. TikTok Chief Executive Officer Shou Chew — who will continue running ByteDance's most valuable asset globally — gets a seat on the board. His lieutenant Adam Presser will helm the American venture as CEO.

A TikTok sale concludes a yearslong geopolitical and regulatory tug-of-war that, for half a decade, has threatened to shut down TikTok in the U.S. over national security concerns. Congress originally passed legislation in 2024 to ban the app unless ByteDance sold TikTok — citing concerns that the Chinese government could abuse access to U.S. user data or use the app to push narratives preferred by Beijing. TikTok has maintained neither has happened.

A deal was initially supposed to be done by January 2025 to avoid a ban, but U.S. President Donald Trump extended the deadline for a deal on several occasions to give TikTok more time. The resolution, years after a potential ban was first discussed, is a win for small businesses, big brands and content creators whose livelihoods depend on TikTok, and for the roughly 200 million U.S. users who frequent the app each month for news and entertainment.

Under the arrangement — originally announced by the Trump administration in September — new investors including Oracle, Silver Lake and MGX will own 50% of the new TikTok U.S. entity. Existing ByteDance investors will control 30.1% of the new company, and ByteDance will hold 19.9%, in accordance with the law.

The new entity will be responsible for moderating content on TikTok and protecting U.S. users' data. It will be governed by a new, seven-member majority-American board. Oracle, already a longtime TikTok cloud computing partner, will serve as a security guard charged with ensuring TikTok is following the law.

Still, critics have argued that the arrangement does not adequately adhere to the U.S. national security law passed in 2024 under the Biden administration that forced a spinoff, and it's unclear if any of those critics will challenge the deal.

That law stipulates that ByteDance can have no operational relationship with U.S. TikTok. TikTok says its joint venture has been established in compliance with Trump's September executive order.

The deal the White House put forward allows ByteDance to lease a copy of its content algorithm to the forthcoming U.S. TikTok entity, retraining the new algorithm on U.S. user data. ByteDance is also expected to maintain control over valuable parts of its U.S. TikTok business, including its advertising division and fast-growing e-commerce arm TikTok Shop.