§ 404. Issuance of special number plates. 1. The commissioner may issue special number plates to applicants therefor in the same manner as other number plates are issued pursuant to this article. Such special number plates shall be issued only upon payment of an annual service charge of thirty-one dollars and twenty-five cents in addition to the regular fee prescribed by section four hundred one of this article. Application for special number plates shall be made in accordance with regulations promulgated by the commissioner with respect to issuance of such number plates. Provided, however, in lieu of the annual fee specified herein, the commissioner may establish specific categories of plates for which an annual fee of not less than eighteen dollars and seventy-five cents nor more than thirty-one dollars and twenty-five cents may be charged subject to the approval of the director of the division of the budget. Notwithstanding any inconsistent provision of this section, the difference collected between the special plates fee or service charge set forth in this subdivision in effect on and after September first, two thousand nine and the special plates fee or service charge set forth in this subdivision in effect prior to such date shall be deposited to the credit of the dedicated highway and bridge trust fund.

1-a. The commissioner may issue special number plates to applicants who are members of veterans organizations in the same manner as other number plates are issued pursuant to this article. Such special number plates shall be issued only upon (a) payment of a one-time service charge of ten dollars in addition to the regular registration fee prescribed by section four hundred one of this article, and (b) submission of proof, satisfactory to the commissioner, that the applicant is presently a member of the veterans organization for which such plate is requested. Such membership shall be verified annually by the applicant. Application for such plates shall be made in accordance with regulations promulgated by the commissioner with respect to the issuance of such plates. Provided, however, that nothing contained herein shall be deemed to supersede the provisions of section four hundred four-d, four hundred four-e, four hundred four-h, four hundred four-i, four hundred four-j, four hundred four-k, four hundred four-p, four hundred four-aa, or four hundred four-dd of this article.

2. For purposes of this section, a special number plate shall be a plate which contains not more than eight letters, numerals or any combination thereof and which is reserved by the commissioner for issuance in accordance with the provisions of this section, or a plate reserved for issuance in a series for vehicles owned by public officers, physicians, visiting nurses, accredited representatives of the press or other groups. In issuing special number plates the commissioner shall give those applicants who held a special number plate at the time of the enactment of this section the right to retain such special number plate upon the payment of the annual service charge of thirty-one dollars and twenty-five cents. Provided, however, that such right of retention shall apply only to the first renewal of the registration of such special number plate following the enactment of this section. Notwithstanding any inconsistent provision of this section, the difference collected between the annual service charge set forth in this subdivision in effect on and after September first, two thousand nine and the annual service charge set forth in this subdivision in effect prior to such date shall be deposited to the credit of the dedicated highway and bridge trust fund.

3. This section shall not apply to any plates in a series reserved in the public interest for purposes of facilitating identification of state and municipal vehicles and those owned by members of international governmental organizations or any other vehicles which are exempt from the payment of registration fees, nor to plates or series of plates assigned by the commissioner for issuance by county clerks.

4. Nothing contained in this section shall be construed to require the commissioner to issue a special number plate or plates.