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Speed cameras would ticket drivers in these California cities under proposed bill



Isabel Funk
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Vehicles travel through the intersection of Monterey Boulevard and Ridgewood Avenue in San Francisco. A proposed bill would ticket speeding drivers via automated cameras in six California cities, three of which are in the Bay Area.
Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle 2021

Drivers in three Bay Area cities may soon receive automated tickets from speed cameras, if a bill co-sponsored by Mayor London Breed is approved by the Legislature and signed by Gov. Gavin Newsom.

The bill, AB645, written by Assembly Member Laura Friedman, D-Glendale, would launch a five-year pilot program for the automated speed enforcement systems in six California cities, including San Francisco, Oakland and San Jose. The other cities are Los Angeles, Glendale and Long Beach.

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Drivers speeding more than 11 mph over the speed limit in areas monitored by the system would receive warning notices for a first offense, and tickets for further violations. The cameras would be installed in areas with frequent accidents, areas with frequent street racing incidents and school zones.

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“My daughter, who is 10, has a right to not have people driving 80 miles an hour down our residential streets, and we’re not able to stop that right now,” Friedman said.

Critics of the bill have raised concerns about privacy of the data and footage collected by the cameras, as well as equity concerns in the implementation of the plan.

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Tracy Rosenberg, advocacy director for Oakland Privacy, one of 12 organizations opposing the bill, said despite amendments aiming to mitigate privacy concerns, the information being collected is “necessarily and definitively, susceptible to mishandling.” One recent amendment to the bill stipulates that records must be deleted after three days if there is no citation, or after a year if there is. Those records will remain “confidential,” according to the bill.

Rosenberg said she believes Friedman has made “every effort” to respond to privacy and equity issues within the bill. “My concern here is that even though the language is in the bill, the implementation of the programs have been largely left to the pilot cities themselves, and I don’t know that all of that will translate into how the programs are actually set up and deployed,” she said.

Rosenberg added that with the recent passage of [legislation reducing speed limits](#) in certain areas, drivers could be ticketed for speeds that only recently changed.

Friedman, however, said “it’s not a ‘gotcha,’ ” adding that areas being monitored by speed cameras will be clearly marked.

Jodie Medeiros, executive director of Walk San Francisco, a sponsor of the bill, said the collaborative efforts of community members and lawmakers resulted in a “well-rounded” and “thoughtful” bill that “is really going to be one of those tools that is going to get all of (the Bay Area) cities closer to Vision Zero.”

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[Vision Zero](#) is a pledge San Francisco adopted in 2014 to eliminate traffic fatalities by 2024.

“Vision Zero efforts have historically focused on a traditional law enforcement response to help address speeding and other dangerous driver behaviors. However, these traditional enforcement methods have had a well-documented disparate impact on communities of color, and implicit or explicit racial bias in police traffic stops puts drivers of color at risk,” Breed wrote in a letter of support for the bill.

Supporters of the bill argue that enforcement by camera is more equitable than traditional law enforcement methods because it will minimize interactions between officers and drivers and reduce opportunities for drivers to be targeted based on race, sex or other factors.

The cameras will detect only speed, and will not use facial recognition technology, according to the bill text. A recent amendment also requires that the cameras be angled so as to avoid capturing pedestrians and other drivers.

“They’re not looking at who’s behind the wheel. They’re not looking at where they’re from. They’re not looking at whether or not the car is an old model or a new model. So there’s a type of fairness that’s built into this,” Friedman said.

But some equity concerns remain.

Rosenberg cited a similar program in Chicago, where households in primarily Black and Latino communities received tickets from automated systems at twice the rate of households in predominantly white neighborhoods between 2015 and 2019.

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“There is a long history of these kinds of programs ... disproportionately impacting lower-income communities of color,” she said. “And that is largely because of a long, long history of traffic infrastructure that has brought certain traffic-calming features and amenities to more affluent neighborhoods, and not so much to less affluent neighborhoods.”

The Peace Officers Research Association of California, a statewide police union, raised concerns that the bill could replace officers, and asked in a letter that the city of Oakland be removed from the pilot program over concerns that it will “eliminate the Police Department’s entire traffic division.” But a spokesperson for Oakland Mayor Sheng Thao told The Chronicle those concerns aren’t warranted. “That’s simply not accurate. We are not eliminating the traffic division,” spokesperson Julie Edwards said in a statement.

The bill contains a number of provisions aimed at mitigating the impact to low-income communities, including options for community service in lieu of paying the fine and a significantly lower fine than traditional tickets.

Friedman said the bill requires community involvement and feedback throughout the process, as well as equity studies to ensure the program isn’t disproportionately affecting low-income communities and communities of color.

“We have really gone out of our way to address all manner of things,” she said. “Every concern that’s been brought to us that’s a valid concern, we have tried to work with stakeholders to create a model, because we do know that there are very valid concerns about what this bill is seeking to do.”

The bill still must win approval from the state Senate before heading to Newsom’s desk.

Chronicle staff writer Sarah Ravani contributed to this report.

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Isabel Funk joined The Chronicle in summer 2023 as a multiplatform editing intern through the Dow Jones News Fund. She is a rising senior at Northwestern University studying journalism and gender and sexuality. She previously worked at the Daily Northwestern, where she served as the summer editor-in-chief, print managing editor and campus editor. As a reporter, she has primarily focused on student activism and labor rights, with additional reporting on local city politics. Born and raised in Seattle, Funk has also interned at Sound Publishing in Washington state.

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