

California green lights automated camera pilot program to catch speeding motorists

By Eric He

12/07/2023 08:00 AM EST

Over 200 communities across 20 states and the District of Columbia currently [allow automatic speed cameras](#) to detect speed violations — and California is set to join them after legislation passed this year approving a pilot program in six cities. The Golden State already allows cameras to [detect red light violations](#), but not speeding.

The measure, [AB 645](#), was signed into law by Gov. [Gavin Newsom](#) on Oct. 13 and allows several jurisdictions — Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Jose, Oakland, Glendale and Long Beach — to place a limited number of cameras on their streets for five years. The author, Assemblymember [Laura Friedman](#) (D-Glendale), hopes that from there, they'll make the program permanent.

The bill faced opposition from the ACLU and other civil rights and privacy groups, which argued that the law will disproportionately impact marginalized communities.

Friedman — who chaired the Assembly's Transportation Committee until Speaker [Robert Rivas](#) (D-Hollister) assigned new committee chairs on Nov. 21 — said in an interview with POLITICO that traffic violence and speeding are getting worse in California, and there are times when she feels unsafe when driving. Attempts to pass similar legislation failed the previous two years, even though traffic accidents have surged. San Francisco [had 39 traffic fatalities](#) last year, its worst total since its "Vision Zero" plan began in 2014, and Los Angeles [is on pace](#) to surpass 300 traffic collision deaths again this year after recording its highest death toll last year from traffic crashes in 20 years.

The Southern California lawmaker, who took amendments that she believes address concerns about equity and privacy, sees the bill as a step toward addressing a systemic culture and infrastructure that has allowed for reckless driving.

"These are choices that people make, that elected officials make, that agencies make, that automakers make when they design cars, that people make when they drive," Friedman said. "These are choices that we've made, and we do not have to accept this carnage."

WHAT'S IN THE BILL?

This Pro Bill Analysis is based on the [text of the bill](#) as chaptered on Oct. 13.

The bill states that it is the findings of the Legislature that there is a need for a speed safety system, citing the disproportionate impact of traditional enforcement methods on communities of color and racial bias in traffic stops made by police. It contends that similar programs in other states have been successful in reducing speeding and addressing traffic safety concerns (Sec. 1).

The measure references [a 2020 report](#) by the state's transportation department on preventing traffic fatalities, which concluded that speed safety systems are an effective countermeasure to speeding, as well as [a 2017 study by the National Transportation Safety Board](#) that found speed safety programs offered significant safety improvements.

AB 645 declarations contend that speed safety systems can advance equity by "improving reliability and fairness" in traffic enforcement and making enforcement "more predictable, effective and broadly implemented," leading to a change in driver behavior. The measure also states that speed safety systems are a reliable and cost-effective way to enforce speed limits on streets where drivers frequently speed (Sec. 1).

The measure amends [Section 70615 of the Government Code](#) to add any violation under AB 645 to the list of appealable penalties to the superior court while the pilot program is in place (Sec. 2, 3).

The Speed Safety System Pilot Program is added as Article 3 of Chapter 7 of Division 11 of the [Vehicle Code](#) (Sec. 4), and applies to Los Angeles, San Jose, Oakland, Glendale, Long Beach and San Francisco.

Under the law, these six cities are allowed to implement a speed enforcement program that uses a speed safety system — defined as a “fixed or mobile radar or laser system or any other electronic device” that automatically detects speeding violations and can take a clear picture of speeding vehicles’ license plates. Each city’s respective department of transportation would be responsible for operating the program.

The cameras will only be allowed to be placed in:

- Safety corridors, as defined under [Section 22358.7 of the Vehicle Code](#). The code prevents cities from designating more than a fifth of their streets as safety corridors.
- Streets where speed racing is prominent, defined as four or more incidents in two years with a law enforcement response
- School zones.

The number of cameras allowed varies by the population of the city per the 2020 census:

- Cities with a population over 3 million (Los Angeles) will have a maximum of 125 cameras
- Cities with population between 800,000 and 3 million (San Jose and San Francisco) will have a maximum of 33 cameras
- Cities with a population between 300,000 and 800,000 (Oakland and Long Beach) will have a maximum of 18 cameras
- Cities with a population less than 300,00 (Glendale) will have a maximum of nine cameras.

The cities are required to place the cameras in geographically and socioeconomically diverse areas, and must explain how they are complying with this requirement (Sec. 4).

When cameras are placed in school zones that have a higher speed limit when children are not present, the school zone speed limit can be enforced up to an hour before school, 10 minutes after school starts, during lunch period and up to an hour after school ends. Flashing beacons will indicate when the school zone speed limit is in place and the camera is being used.

Where cameras are in use, their presence must be clearly identified with a “Photo Enforced” sign, and the speed limit must be posted at least 500 feet before the camera’s location. The locations of cameras will be listed on the city’s website. Cameras will be inspected at least once every 60 days and calibrated at least once a year. Drivers will be notified of violations in real time via fixed or mobile speed safety systems.

Under this measure, cameras are not allowed on highways, freeways, expressways or any other area under the jurisdiction of the California Highway Patrol.

Cities will have to engage in a public information campaign for at least 30 days before putting speed cameras in place, which must include announcements in major media outlets.

During the first 60 days of the pilot program, drivers caught speeding by the cameras will be given warnings rather than violations and if additional cameras are added, the same leeway will be provided for the first 60 days after their installation, as well.

Additionally, warnings will be given for the first speeding violation for drivers going 11 to 15 miles per hour over the speed limit (Sec. 4).

Prior to putting a system in place, cities must adopt a use policy that details the specific purposes, authorized uses and any applicable rules/processes for those administering the system — plus what data the cameras can collect, who can access it and how the data can be transferred. The policy must be posted to the city’s website at least 30 days before adoption.

Each city will need to approve an impact report for the safety cameras prior to the program’s implementation, which should include:

- The impact of the cameras on civil liberties and civil rights
- Any plans to safeguard those rights
- How much the cameras cost.

The report should also explain why low-income neighborhoods that have cameras in them experience high fatality and injury collisions due to unsafe speed.

The measure requires cities to consult and work collaboratively with local stakeholders, including groups working on racial equity, privacy protection and economic justice. Further, cities will need to establish uniform guidelines for issuing violations and storing confidential information.

The legislation states that cameras can only take pictures of the car's license plate and rear of the vehicle, and all pictures must be kept confidential and would not be eligible for admittance into a court proceeding as a hearsay statement. Confidential information from the Department of Motor Vehicles also must be kept private (Sec. 4).

The records can be held for up to 60 days after the notice of violation, and cities can retain information about a citation or violation for three years. Administrative records can be held for 120 days.

If a photo is taken that does not result in a violation, it must be destroyed within five business days. The measure explicitly prohibits the use of facial recognition technology. Drivers also have the right to review and obtain a copy of the evidence collected by the cameras.

The measure prohibits contracts between a city and manufacturer of the cameras or any vendor from allowing payment based on the number of violations issued.

Speed cameras must produce at least one of the following results or else be removed after 18 months:

- A reduction in the 85th percentile speed of vehicles, compared to before the camera was in place
- A 20 percent reduction in speeding of 10 miles per hour over the limit
- A 20 percent reduction in violators who receive two or more violations at the camera location since they were put in place.

If these thresholds aren't met, cities can still keep the camera at the location by adding "traffic-calming" measures to the street, such as bicycle lanes, curb extensions, median islands and roundabouts. The camera can stay in place for two years while construction on the traffic calming measure is ongoing.

If after a year of the traffic-calming measure being in place, the thresholds are still not met, the city must build additional traffic-calming measures or remove the camera.

The measure calls for cameras to be angled and focused so that only pictures of speeding violations are captured "to the extent feasible."

Next, the bill addresses penalties for speeding violations caught on the cameras. Any violations would be treated as a civil penalty, and would not result in the suspension of a license or a point being added to a driver's record. The cameras would only take pictures of vehicles traveling 11 miles per hour or more over the speed limit.

The fines based on speeding levels are:

- \$50 for going 11 to 15 miles per hour over the limit
- \$100 for going 16 to 25 miles per hour over the limit
- \$200 for going 26 miles per hour or more over the limit, up to 100 miles per hour
- \$500 for going 100 miles per hour or more.

Emergency vehicles are exempt from fines.

The violation — along with basic information about it, such as when and where the violation occurred — must be issued within 15 days, and the driver has 30 days to pay or contest it.

The measure states that mobile radar or laser systems can be used at a fixed location; otherwise, the city must wait at least two years after the first fixed system is installed before utilizing mobile radar or laser systems (Sec. 4).

Revenues from speeding fines are to be put back into the program itself, and then used for traffic-calming measures, installing cameras, enforcing violations and complying with reporting requirements. Cities must commit to spending at least the average of what they spent from 2016 to 2019 on traffic-calming measures in order to stay in the pilot program. Any excess revenue must be put towards traffic-calming measures within three years or be put into the [Active Transportation Program](#).

A driver who is under criminal investigation cannot be subject to a civil penalty for the same act.

The measure specifies the pilot program will last five years, or until Jan. 1, 2032 — whichever is sooner.

Next, the bill lays out the process for appealing violations. A driver has 30 days to file for an initial appeal, after which they can request an administrative hearing overseen by a qualified independent examiner, if the appeal is denied. After that hearing, the driver can appeal to the superior court.

The fines will be adjusted or waived based on the income level of the violator. People classified as “indigent” can perform community service instead of paying the fine. According to the measure, an “indigent” driver is defined as someone whose monthly income is 200 percent or less of the poverty level pursuant to [Section 68632 of the Government Code](#) or receives public benefits listed under subdivision (a) of Section 68632, such as food stamps, Medi-Cal and unemployment compensation.

Indigent violators will also be eligible to pay fines via monthly installments with a cap of \$25 per month, and a processing fee of \$5. Beyond that, fines will be reduced by 80 percent for indigent violators, and 50 percent for people who are up to 250 percent above the federal poverty level. Those eligible must show proof of income or receipt of benefits.

Cities must submit a report on their respective programs by March of the fifth year of their program, and the report should include (Sec. 4):

- Data on how many cars are speeding at different levels, the average speed of vehicles and 85th percentile speed of vehicles
- The number of violations issued by month and year, the locations of the violations and number of vehicles with two or more violations in any given month of year
- Before and after data on the number of collisions in locations with cameras, compared to citywide data
- The number of violations paid, delinquent violations and number of violations that resulted in a review
- The costs associated with implementing and operating the cameras, along with each city’s revenue
- An analysis of the racial and economic equity impact of the cameras, which should be done in collaboration with local racial justice and economic equity stakeholder groups. This must include a breakdown of the number of indigent people who received tickets, violators making up to 250 percent above the poverty line and number of violations issued per zip code.

The measure specifies that pictures taken by the cameras are confidential and exempted from disclosure under the California Public Records Act in order to “protect the privacy interests” of those who are issued violations. However, data concerning the number of violations and speed of the vehicles can be released to the public (Sec. 5).

AB 645 is implementable under a special statute, citing “unique circumstances with traffic speed enforcement” in the six cities undergoing the pilot program (Sec. 6).

WHO ARE THE POWER PLAYERS?

Assemblymember **Laura Friedman** (D-Glendale) has made traffic safety a priority since her days on the Glendale City Council, and AB 645 was her third attempt at passing legislation to implement a statewide speed camera pilot program.

Assemblymembers [Miguel Santiago](#) (D-Los Angeles) and [Phil Ting](#) (D-San Francisco) introduced the bill alongside Friedman. Assemblymembers [Mia Bonta](#) (D-Alameda) and [Mike Gipson](#) (D-Carson) were the principal co-authors in the Assembly, and Sen. [Scott Wiener](#) (D-San Francisco) was the lead co-author in the Senate. The other co-authors on the measure were: Assemblymembers [Marc Berman](#) (D-Menlo Park), [Matt Haney](#) (D-San Francisco), [Alex Lee](#) (D-San Jose), [Kevin McCarty](#) (D-Sacramento), [Buffy Wicks](#) (D-Oakland) and Sen. [Henry Stern](#) (D-Sherman Oaks).

The bill was supported by a number of traffic safety and transportation groups, and sponsored by [Streets Are For Everyone](#) (SAFE), [Streets for All](#) and [Walk San Francisco](#), along with other representatives from the cities taking part in the pilot program.

SAFE executive director Damian Kevitt said in a [statement](#) that reckless speeding has led to a public health crisis, and that reengineering roads is a slow and expensive process.

“We need a way to protect our communities from traffic violence right now,” Kevitt said. “AB 645 is part of that solution.”

Meanwhile, the **ACLU** and other opponents counter that the Legislature should invest in infrastructure and speed-calming measures rather than a speed camera program. In a [letter](#) to Newsom dated Sept. 15, civil rights and privacy groups — along with the **Electronic Frontier Foundation**, **Human Rights Watch** and **Black Lives Matter CA** — argued that the law will wrongfully penalize marginalized communities that are already impacted by historically racist urban planning decisions.

Asiyahola Sankara, an equal justice works fellow with ACLU, told POLITICO that the organization shares Friedman’s concerns about traffic safety and called the amendments taken to mitigate equity and privacy concerns “helpful,” but added that they “didn’t get at our core concerns.”

The ACLU’s perspective, according to Sankara, is that marginalized communities are being harmed twice: First by under-investment in infrastructure leading to higher fatality rates and again with laws implementing fines on people living in such communities to pay for “correcting those racist decisions.”

“That sort of double damage, we do not believe is the way forward in addressing this historic crisis of traffic violence,” Sankara said.

WHAT’S HAPPENED SO FAR?

Former Assemblymember David Chiu — now the city attorney at San Francisco — first introduced legislation ([AB 342](#)) in 2017 that would have allowed for speed camera pilot programs in San Francisco and San Jose.

Chiu’s measure, which did not pass, marked the first attempt to introduce speed cameras at the local level since former state Sen. Sheila Kuehl tried three times unsuccessfully to implement such a program in Beverly Hills in 2005 ([SB 466](#)), 2006 ([SB 1300](#)) and 2008 ([SB 1325](#)).

In 2018, Friedman introduced [AB 2363](#), which originally aimed to make it easier for jurisdictions to lower speed limits but [was watered down](#) to a study bill before being chaptered. The task force created by the measure, however, [recommended the use](#) of automated speed enforcement to supplement law enforcement as an effective countermeasure to speeding, adding that public policy considerations should be taken into account.

That preceded two efforts by Friedman to implement a pilot program across multiple cities in the state: [AB 550](#) in 2021 (Chiu served as lead author) and [AB 2336](#) in 2022. The latter included the city of Palm Springs instead of Long Beach, and AB 550 did not include Glendale or Long Beach. Neither bill made it past the suspense file in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

Friedman said that this year, at least five additional cities reached out seeking to be in the pilot program. She believes the bill passed this year because Californians are noticing an increase in reckless driving. In October, four Pepperdine students [were killed](#) when a speeding motorist crashed into them along the Pacific Coast Highway, sparking immediate calls for traffic-calming measures.

Friedman also pointed to her work with various stakeholders to address concerns.

At the [July 11 Senate Judiciary Committee hearing](#), Friedman called the bill a “three-year effort” in calming fears from those against the idea of speed cameras. She described negotiations to limit the number of cameras in each city, in response to

concerns from law enforcement that their jobs might be impacted. For those who might struggle to pay a traditional speeding ticket, she agreed to allow lower fines based on income. The bill also incentivizes cities to place cameras in areas to decrease speeding, with a provision requiring construction of speed-calming measures if the number of tickets issued isn't reduced by a certain amount.

Friedman said that her work in engaging stakeholders led to groups like AAA changing course and backing this year's legislation, with the group writing in a [letter of support](#) that AB 645 is a "good starting point" after years of collaboration and discussion. The engagement this year "earned us a lot of support that we didn't have in the past," according to Friedman. However, she claimed that the ACLU will "never support" speed camera legislation, no matter how well written.

"This was not something that we undertook lightly," Friedman said. "It's a bill I've spent an enormous amount of time working on as an advocate, and as a policymaker."

Overall, California is a latecomer in approving automatic speed cameras, which Friedman attributes to the state taking opponents' concerns more seriously than elsewhere in the country, and ensuring that the bill was about changing driver behavior and not a punitive, revenue-generating measure. She has not come across another measure in the country with similar provisions safeguarding against potential equity and privacy violations.

"We've just constantly done whatever we can to make it a model ordinance," Friedman said.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Opponents remain concerned that the legislation will result in a stark increase in speeding tickets in California.

Based on data from programs in Chicago, Washington, D.C and New York City — in addition to a "conservative estimate" of 0.75 tickets issued per person — the coalition against the bill wrote in their veto request that AB 645 will result in 5 million additional tickets per year in the pilot cities. That would double the number of annual traffic tickets issued in the entire state, with the groups contending that the subsequent appeals will lead to a backlog of cases before the superior court system.

Sankara, with the ACLU, said that lawmakers lack the "political will to put forward meaningful and transformative infrastructure and design solutions" and are instead "over-committed to policy solutions that are punitive, and wildly under-committed to solutions that are preventative." He advocates for "upstream" improvements in infrastructure that prevent a driver from speeding in the first place.

"If we're building streets that resemble runways, people are going to speed," Sankara said.

The ACLU is having "ongoing" conversations with legislators to carry their traffic safety policy goals, he added.

Friedman will not have the same impact on transportation legislation next session. She was not only stripped of her position as chair of the Assembly Transportation Committee in November — a title she had held since 2020 — but Rivas also removed her from the committee entirely, amid a flurry of changes by the new speaker heading into his first full session at the helm. Friedman is also running for the Congressional seat held by Rep. [Adam Schiff](#), who is making a bid for the U.S. Senate.

Her replacement as transportation chair, Assemblymember [Lori Wilson](#) (D-Suisun City), was notably the only Democrat to consistently vote against the measure. Sen. [Dave Cortese](#) (D-San Jose) cast a "no" vote in the Senate Transportation Committee but laid off on the floor.

Wilson, during the Assembly Privacy and Consumer Protection Committee [hearing](#) on April 25, [voiced concerns](#) about the bill's potential impact on communities of color and said that adding cameras to watch drivers is akin to increasing police presence.

"Surveilling them is policing them as well," Wilson said, adding that she fundamentally disagreed with Friedman's approach to reducing speeding.

[In a statement](#) after being named chair, Wilson said that transportation policy "should support housing creation, make travel shorter, and our quality of life better."

“It’s not doing that well enough right now at all, so I’m going to ask a lot of questions so we can get answers that deliver better outcomes for Californians,” Wilson added.

Meanwhile, Friedman hopes that legislatures in other states will consider revising their policies around automatic speed cameras to match the regulations in California. She views AB 645 as groundbreaking legislation providing the strongest equity and privacy provisions in the nation for speed cameras while reducing interactions between law enforcement and the community.

She wants her daughter, who starts middle school next year, to be able to walk to school safely in a neighborhood that doesn’t have a lot of sidewalks.

“I hope that it helps more than anything,” Friedman said of the pilot program. “I hope that it helps, because the police can’t be everywhere at once.”

WHAT ARE SOME STORIES ON THE BILL?

[Read POLITICO news on AB 645.](#)