

California bill seeks to slow rollout of robotaxis by giving power to locals

By Eric He

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The fight between self-driving car companies and efforts to regulate them has reentered the spotlight this year in the California Legislature — and this time, it includes a labor-backed effort to [shift control over robotaxis](#) from the state to local jurisdictions.

[SB 915](#), introduced on Jan. 9, would give cities and counties final say over allowing autonomous vehicles to operate in their jurisdictions. Currently, state agencies have exclusive oversight on regulating robotaxis. The measure, pushed by the Teamsters Union and authored by Silicon Valley state Sen. [Dave Cortese](#) (D-San Jose), would likely result in more restrictions over where and when autonomous vehicles can operate — as cities and counties with an unfavorable outlook on the industry would be able to block robotaxis from operating within their boundaries.

Autonomous vehicle companies such as Waymo and Cruise — both of which successfully lobbied the state last year to allow them to operate in San Francisco — are likely to resist the measure, especially as Waymo [looks to expand](#) into Los Angeles. The legislation is also part of a [broader push by lawmakers](#) this year to address the growth of artificial intelligence and automation.

“AI in general is coming at us like a booster rocket went off,” Cortese told POLITICO. “We don’t have an absolute laissez-faire system where anyone who innovates something can just put it out on the street without regulation.”

WHAT’S IN THE BILL?

This Pro Bill Analysis is based on the [text of the bill](#) as introduced on Jan. 9.

The Autonomous Vehicle Service Deployment and Data Transparency Act (Sec. 1) outlines various findings regarding the growth of autonomous vehicles, including that state agencies in the Department of Motor Vehicles and California Public Utilities Commission are responsible for regulating these services in California. As such services continue to expand, the bill states, the vehicles have contributed to a number of accidents, injuries and traffic congestion — and the bill would seek to increase local control over how the vehicles are deployed and regulated due to transportation being largely localized (Sec. 1).

The bill would add Section 53075.1 to the [California Government Code](#), which would apply to autonomous vehicle companies only after they have received approval from the DMV and CPUC to conduct taxi services or use their driverless vehicles for other commercial activity. The measure would require companies to receive authorization from a local city or county via an ordinance before it can operate in that jurisdiction (Sec. 2).

The local body would be allowed to enact an ordinance or resolution regulating autonomous vehicle services in order to protect public health, safety and welfare. Such a policy would need to, at a minimum, establish a permitting program with certain provisions.

Cities and counties would be able to cap the fares that companies may charge. Additionally, companies would be able to calculate fares via any type of approved technology, and would be required to post its rates online.

Any proposed local regulations would also need to include (Sec. 2) :

— A “reasonable” limit on the number of robotaxis and the hours they can operate, which the local jurisdiction could establish based on the resulting traffic congestion

— A certification process to ensure compliance with disability access laws

- Fees and penalties for moving violations or traffic obstructions
- A way for first responders to override or otherwise make robotaxis interoperable during an emergency
- Data sharing agreements necessary to carry out the policy.

The measure would allow jurisdictions to enact necessary fees for carrying out the local policy.

Further, autonomous vehicle companies permitted by a local jurisdiction would be required to maintain the following:

- “Reasonable” financial responsibility
- An education and training program pertaining to disability access, to stress that it is illegal to decline service to people with disabilities or individuals with a service animal.
- Compliance with the [Vehicle Code](#) and safe operating conditions for their cars, which local governments would be allowed to inspect annually.

Companies that operate without local approval would be fined at least \$5,000.

The measure would allow a city or county to enter into agreements with other local jurisdictions or a transit agency to regulate autonomous vehicle companies with robotaxi services within the geographical boundaries (Sec. 2).

Lastly, the bill would apply to all cities and charter cities as a matter of statewide concern (Sec. 3). No state funding would be needed to implement the measure (Sec. 4).

WHO ARE THE POWER PLAYERS?

Sen. [Dave Cortese](#) (D-San Jose) introduced the measure, carrying a proposal backed by the [Teamsters Union](#). Assemblymember [Freddie Rodriguez](#) (D-Pomona) is the bill’s principal co-author. The **League of California Cities** is also sponsoring the measure.

In a [news release](#) announcing the measure, Cortese’s office said SB 915 is modeled after an existing law allowing local control over taxicab operations. The senator called the emergence of autonomous vehicles an “exciting technological development,” but added that his bill would help strike a balance between innovation and public safety.

“Our streets should not be private laboratories for untested technology,” said Peter Finn, vice president of the Teamsters’ western region, in a statement. “SB 915 is the common-sense measure to ensure autonomous vehicles don’t operate in a regulatory vacuum, putting lives at risk. Local communities deserve a say in how these vehicles operate on their streets.”

Waymo and **Cruise** have yet to officially weigh in on the measure — but the battle lines could be similar to those drawn over [a bill](#) last year that would have required a human driver in autonomous trucks. That measure by Assemblymember [Cecilia Aguiar-Curry](#) (D-Winters) was vetoed by Gov. [Gavin Newsom](#) and opposed by a number of business and tech organizations, plus several local Chamber of Commerce groups, Waymo and Tesla.

The proposal could prove to be a challenge for Newsom, who supported the tech industry last year by vetoing Aguiar-Curry’s bill, reflecting a desire to not stifle California’s innovation economy. If SB 915 reaches his desk, the governor — who drew the ire of labor groups after the veto — would have to again decide between labor and business.

Los Angeles Mayor **Karen Bass** has expressed skepticism over allowing autonomous vehicles to operate in the city without local control, noting her concerns in a [November letter](#) to the California Public Utilities Commission.

“To date, local jurisdictions like Los Angeles have had little to no input in AV deployment and are already seeing significant harm and disruption,” Bass wrote.

Bass has not indicated a position on this particular bill — but if the former state Assembly speaker were to throw her support behind the measure, it would ratchet up the temperature even more, as Waymo seeks the state’s permission to operate robotaxis in her city without local input.

WHAT'S HAPPENED SO FAR?

Newsom vetoed the autonomous trucks bill last year, [arguing that](#) the state's existing regulations provided sufficient oversight of the industry. In doing so, he rejected arguments from lawmakers and unions who countered that the people in charge of monitoring autonomous vehicles were prioritizing profit over labor and safety concerns.

When lawmakers in 2016 attempted to give the state power over regulating taxicabs rather than cities and counties — [via a bill](#) by Assemblymember [Evan Low](#) (D-Campbell) — Newsom's predecessor, Jerry Brown, vetoed it. In his [veto message](#), Brown cited "the long-standing regulation of taxicabs by cities and counties," adding that "such a massive change" could not be justified.

SB 915 would do the opposite, by applying the same local regulations already governing taxicabs to the robotaxis. While state lawmakers would essentially be ceding some control over autonomous vehicles by transferring power to individual jurisdictions, Cortese and other labor-friendly legislators view the measure as a way to clamp down on an industry that is growing too quickly for regulators with the backing of a governor willing to give the industry leeway to expand.

Opponents of the burgeoning technology cite troubles over the rollout of robotaxis in San Francisco.

Despite strenuous opposition from San Francisco officials, the California Public Utilities Commission [voted last summer](#) to let Cruise and Waymo's driverless cars transport paying customers. Local concerns were validated almost immediately by a litany of mishaps, peaking when a Cruise vehicle [struck and dragged a woman](#) who had been thrown into its path by another vehicle.

The state [yanked Cruise's permits](#), and the company announced a nationwide halt in driverless deployment shortly thereafter, pointing to a need to rebuild trust. The debacle has become a cautionary tale — and one that provided powerful ammunition to industry critics, including labor unions who have amplified safety concerns as they seek to prevent automation from erasing jobs.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The bill would be eligible for its first committee hearing in the Senate next month.

Teamsters is also planning to reintroduce the bill requiring a driver in autonomous trucks, touting that measure and SB 915 in a news release prioritizing the regulation of autonomous vehicles. [Another bill](#), by Assemblymember [Phil Ting](#) (D-San Francisco), would allow autonomous vehicles to be ticketed for breaking traffic laws.

In Los Angeles, where the next local battle over robotaxi deployment is set to take place, Waymo will need to apply for authorization with the CPUC after the DMV approved its expansion into the city earlier this month. But if SB 915 passes, Bass and other city officials would hold the regulatory power over how and when robotaxis get to roam the streets.

WHAT ARE SOME STORIES ON THE BILL?

[Read POLITICO news on SB 915.](#)

Jeremy B. White contributed to this report.