

California lawmaker brings back complete streets proposal, adds speed-limiting technology

By Eric He

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This Pro Bill Analysis covers two bills: SB 960 and SB 961.

Drivers in California looking to get away with going over the speed limit may soon literally not have a choice, under a first-in-the-nation proposal that would require new vehicles to have technology that prevents vehicles from speeding.

[SB 961](#), authored by Sen. [Scott Wiener](#) (D-San Francisco), would mandate that beginning in 2027, new cars be equipped with a device that stops the vehicle from going more than 10 miles per hour over the speed limit.

It's a bold effort by Wiener to address a rise in pedestrian fatalities in California — which [increased by 22 percent](#) between 2019 and 2022, with an estimated 1,100 fatalities in 2022. San Francisco had 25 traffic fatalities in 2023 and 39 in 2022, [its worst total](#) since its “Vision Zero” plan began in 2014. Meanwhile, Los Angeles' 336 traffic fatalities last year outnumbered homicides and [was the highest](#) since the city started recording data more than two decades ago.

The bill has sparked [immense backlash](#) from critics eager to point to another example of overregulation in California, and Gov. [Gavin Newsom](#) — who has already put the brakes on a [wealth tax proposal](#) and an attempt to [ban youth tackle football](#) — signaled that pushing forward a similarly controversial issue could be a gift to Republicans in an election year.

Wiener introduced SB 961 on Jan. 23 along with [SB 960](#), which would require the state's transportation department to plan for infrastructure improvements that prioritize pedestrians, bicyclists and public transit users.

“No one has a constitutional or a God-given right to drive dangerously and put people's lives at risk,” Wiener [told POLITICO](#). “It's horrifying how many pedestrians are being seriously injured or dying.”

WHAT'S IN THE BILL?

This Pro Bill Analysis is based on the [text of SB 961](#) as introduced on Jan. 23.

Beginning in 2027, the bill would require all cars, trucks and buses manufactured or sold in California to be equipped with an intelligent speed limiter system, adding Article 19 on Speed Limiter Technology to Division 12 of the [California Vehicle Code](#) (Sec. 1).

The measure would define an “intelligent speed limiter system” as a system installed in a vehicle that electronically prevents the driver from exceeding the speed limit by more than 10 miles per hour. The system would have access to a database of posted speed limits and the GPS location of the vehicle.

The driver would only be able to temporarily disable the system, which would operate passively — meaning the technology would alert drivers that they're exceeding the speed limit, rather than an active system, which would actually slow down the vehicle's speed.

Emergency vehicles, however, would be exempt from the measure. The bill would allow manufacturers to fully disable the system for emergency vehicles or other vehicles authorized by the commissioner of the California Highway Patrol if doing so is “reasonable, practical and would not pose a risk to public safety” (Sec. 1).

Next, the measure would add Section 34512 to the Vehicle Code, which would require trucks over 10,000 pounds manufactured or sold in the state to install side guards on both sides of the vehicle (Sec. 2).

The bill would define a “side guard” as a lateral protection system that ensures the occupant survival space in the car is not affected, if a midsize car crashes into the truck at 40 miles per hour or slower from any angle or location. The guard must also cover and protect exposed areas between the front and rear wheels of the truck.

The California Highway Patrol would oversee inspection of compliance, and drivers would be required to regularly inspect and repair any damaged side guards (Sec. 2).

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The bill states in its declarations that the California Department of Transportation should play a leadership role in advancing transit priorities, including making changes to the highway network to support fast and reliable transit. However, despite committing to complete streets priorities such as [Director’s Policy 37](#) in 2021, the measure contends that there has not been significant progress toward achieving those goals (Sec. 1).

The proposal’s findings add that state policies, programs and agencies do not consistently express laws in place that underscore a shift from car dependence to walking, biking and using public transit. The bill cites infrastructure improvements that only benefit cars, as well as a continued high rate of pedestrian and bicyclist traffic deaths and a lack of investment in reliable transportation options for underserved communities.

The measure would amend [Section 14526.4 of the California Government Code](#) to direct the state Transportation Department and California Transportation Commission to prioritize facilities for pedestrians, bicyclists and transit users in their asset management plan and projects for the [state highway operation and protection program](#), respectively. The plan would also need to include assets toward a complete streets perspective. (Sec. 2).

The amended code would require four and 10-year targets and performance measures for state transportation goals, including the complete streets assets. The updated asset management plan would guide which transit projects are prioritized, pursuant to the measure.

Next, the bill would add to [Section 14526.6 of the Government Code](#) to require that the Department of Transportation’s quarterly report to the transportation commission include a description of pedestrian, bicycle and transit facilities on projects completed during the previous quarter — including the number, extent and type of facility (Sec. 3).

The legislation would add Section 14526.8 to the [Government Code](#), which would state that, beginning in 2025, all projects funded by the Transportation Department must provide comfortable, convenient and connected complete streets facilities for pedestrians, bicyclists and people taking public transit (Sec. 4).

Specifically, pedestrian and bike facilities would need to be up-to-date with the most recent department guidance and serve people of all ages and abilities. There would also need to be facilities that improve the highway system and the transit user experience. The projects would prioritize underserved communities that have been harmed and segmented by the transportation network, with targeted public outreach to those areas.

The projects would be developed in consultation with local organizations, committees and stakeholders focused on improving bike, pedestrian and transit access.

Projects in areas closed to pedestrians and bikes that do not have plans for a transit route would be exempt from the requirement. For projects involving highway entrances or exits that interact with local highways, the Department of Transportation would need to consult with local jurisdictions in considering bike, pedestrian and transit infrastructure.

However, projects that do not have a need for pedestrian, bicycle or transit infrastructure could be exempt from the requirement, if the Department of Transportation shows supporting data, and engages with the local jurisdiction and other stakeholders. The department would need to provide justification for why it would not include complete streets elements in any given project, and post the reasoning online (Sec. 4).

Finally, the bill would add Article 3.9 to the [Streets and Highways Code](#) requiring the state’s director of transportation to adopt a policy on transit priority projects for state and local highways by 2026.

A transit priority project would be defined as anything that helps public transit vehicles avoid traffic congestion, reduce signal delays and move more predictably and reliably, including (Sec. 5):

— Level boarding, bus bulbs and other measures to make boarding buses more efficient

- Payment systems that reduce boarding times
- Restrictions on turns, as well as exceptions that minimize disruption to transit movements and help transit vehicles and emergency vehicles make otherwise restricted turns
- Enforcement that helps minimize vehicles that block transit stops and routes
- Queue jump lanes for transit vehicles to skip the line of traffic waiting at a signal
- Adjustments to signals that prioritize, retime and preempt a signal in favor of a transit vehicle, such as reducing the length of a red light or extending a green light for the vehicle
- Reserving dedicated lanes for transit vehicles and emergency vehicle

Further, the measure would specify ways to measure progress on the four and 10-year targets for state transportation goals, encouraging — but not requiring — at least a 20 percent improvement for each four-year cycle to the following:

- Transit travel time reliability
- Average transit travel speed
- Average transit travel speed relative to a car's travel speed
- Transit delays, defined as the additional time a rider spends on a segment of a state highway compared to traveling the same segment during a non-congested time period
- Rider delays, defined as the number of riders experiencing a transit delay
- Rider throughput
- Accessing stops, stations and boarding facilities

These targets would be incorporated into the [State Highway System Management Plan](#) beginning in 2027. The measure would call on the Department of Transportation to prioritize its plans based on the performance measures in the legislation, but would consider local plans when identifying transit priority projects (Sec. 5).

For transit priority projects, the Department of Transportation would have 90 business days after receiving an application to make a determination. Projects on state highways where transit buses experience significant delays regularly would be eligible for streamlined approval by the end of 2025. The department would also need to come up with a list of design exceptions that would either be approved automatically or expedited.

Additionally, the department would have to streamline changes to occupancy requirements and hours of enforcement for carpool lanes if a transit bus travels along the route.

Transit priority projects could be denied or delayed in order to conduct a detailed traffic analysis, if the analysis directly relates to the transit performance targets or a potential safety risk (Sec. 5).

The department must approve encroachment permits within 60 days.

Lastly, pedestrian facilities, traffic-calming improvements, bicycle facilities and transit priority projects at locations where a local highway is above, below or intersects with a state highway would also be eligible for streamlined approval (Sec. 5).

WHO ARE THE POWER PLAYERS?

Sen. [Scott Wiener](#) (D-San Francisco) introduced the legislation as the Speeding and Fatality Emergency Reduction on California Streets, or SAFER California Streets, package. Assemblymember [Laura Friedman](#) (D-Glendale) is the principal coauthor on SB 960, with Assemblymember [Alex Lee](#) (D-San Jose) and Sen. [Caroline Menjivar](#) (D-Panorama City) as additional coauthors. Wiener is currently the only author on SB 961.

[Walk SF](#), [Streets For All](#) and [California Bicycle Coalition](#) are sponsors of both bills. [AARP California](#), [TransForm](#) and [KidSafe SF](#) are backing just SB 960.

Seven designated high-injury streets in San Francisco are currently overseen by [Caltrans](#), and WalkSF Executive Director [Jodie Medeiros](#) said Caltrans has not been following [its own directives](#) in implementing a complete streets design.

“We haven't seen enough changes on our state-owned roads in a city like San Francisco that make it safe for people walking and on bikes,” Medeiros told POLITICO.

Likewise, [Kendra Ramsey](#), executive director of the California Bicycle Coalition, told POLITICO that SB 960 is “essentially legislating the director’s policy into state law.”

On SB 961, sponsors believe that sharing personal stories with lawmakers about family members or friends experiencing traffic violence will help sway opinions on implementing speed-limiting devices in cars. They’ve also pointed to past regulations — like seat belt requirements — as policies that were considered controversial at the time but have now become commonplace and have saved countless lives.

“Those are the stories that really do change people's attitudes and realize that a person's convenience of, ‘I want to drive fast’ versus the devastation of real lives being altered because of those decisions,” Medeiros said.

Industry groups, however, are likely to oppose the measure. The [Alliance for Automotive Innovation](#), a trade group for car manufacturers, said it would prefer for legislators to focus on enforcing speeding laws.

Sen. [Roger Niello](#) (R-Fair Oaks), who’s leading the Senate GOP’s response, believes the focus should be on hiring more highway patrol officers rather than “legislating a solution to a problem that is caused by a very few.”

Medeiros argues that while customers buying a new car might not necessarily ask for speed-limiting technology, they will be less likely to oppose the change if the feature already exists in the vehicle. The challenge might be convincing manufacturers to go along with it.

“Folks who are being regulated typically have concerns,” Ramsey said.

WHAT’S HAPPENED SO FAR?

SB 960 marks Wiener’s third attempt at a “complete streets” legislation aimed at redesigning state roads and highways, after [SB 760](#) in 2017 was held in the Assembly Transportation Committee and [SB 127](#) in 2019 was vetoed by Newsom.

Newsom wrote in his [veto message](#) that he supports the concept, but did not like the bill’s “prescriptive and costly approach.” Instead, he signed an [executive order](#) calling for investments in transportation options that contribute to the overall health of Californians and reduce greenhouse gas emissions — which [Wiener’s office described](#) as implementing many of SB 127’s provisions “in watered-down form.”

This year’s bill presents largely similar ideas as SB 127, but adds a greater focus on transit priority projects.

SB 960 will almost certainly be the less controversial bill in the package, as the national headlines are bound to focus on the speed-limiting measure. Assemblymember [Bill Essayli](#) (R-Corona) — a [frequent guest](#) on conservative networks — has already begun fundraising off the proposal, calling it “scary” in a campaign email and launching a [“Freedom of the Roads” survey](#).

“Car culture is in California’s DNA,” Essayli wrote. “And sometimes, going 10+ MPH over the limit is perfectly safe. Not to mention the creepiness of government technology monitoring and controlling our vehicles.”

Republicans aside, Wiener is gearing up for what could be an uncomfortable debate with a tepid Newsom and moderate Democrats, but said what makes the bill powerful is that it “provokes a long overdue conversation.”

Sponsors point to the success of a [pilot program in New York City](#) that launched a few years ago testing intelligent speed assistance technology in 50 city fleet vehicles. The cars traveled more than 133,000 miles and stayed within speed limit parameters 99 percent of the time, with a 36 percent reduction in hard braking events. In Europe, intelligent speed assistance technology is [set to become mandatory](#) in all new cars beginning in July — though in both the New York pilot and Europe regulation, drivers can override the system.

Last year, California lawmakers [passed a measure](#) authored by Friedman green-lighting a pilot program for automatic speeding cameras. It took several years for advocates to lobby that bill through the Legislature, and Medeiros credited part of the effort to families visiting Sacramento and telling legislators about their experiences with traffic violence.

“Our legislators have families,” Medeiros said. “They have loved ones. They have neighbors who they're losing to crashes. They understand the human toll that this takes on the community. And that's where we really find attraction in changing hearts and minds around these bills.”

WHAT'S NEXT?

Both bills will be heard in the Senate Transportation Committee on April 9.

SB 961 may face a steep climb in the Legislature in an election year. Wiener also might not be done with regulating vehicles, [floating possible legislation](#) that would restrict the size of cars.

“He's going to take some arrows,” Medeiros said. “We're all going to take some arrows on this. But I do really firmly believe that once you hear the stories of people whose lives have changed because of crashes, it really does take the wind out of the sails of those people that are saying, ‘It's my right to go fast.’”

WHAT ARE SOME STORIES ON THE BILL?

Read POLITICO news on [SB 960](#) and [SB 961](#).

Dustin Gardiner contributed to this report.