
SENATE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

Senator Lena Gonzalez, Chair

2023 - 2024 Regular

Bill No:	AB 971	Hearing Date:	6/13/2023
Author:	Lee		
Version:	6/1/2023 Amended		
Urgency:	No	Fiscal:	No
Consultant:	Melissa White		

SUBJECT: Vehicles: transit-only traffic lanes

DIGEST: This bill clarifies local authorities may permit other vehicles in transit only traffic lanes.

ANALYSIS:

Existing law:

- 1) Defines “transit-only traffic lane” as any designated transit-only lane on which use is restricted to mass transit vehicles or other designated vehicles, including taxis and vanpools, during posted times.
- 2) Defines a “transit bus” to mean any bus owned or operated by a publically – owned or operated transit system, or operated under contract with a publicly owned or operated transit system, and used to provide to the general public, regularly scheduled transportation for which a fare is charged.
- 3) Authorizes a local authority, with respect to any highway under its jurisdiction, to authorize or permit a portion of the highway to be used exclusively for a public mass transit guideway.
- 4) Prohibits a person from operating a motor vehicle on a portion of the highway designated for the exclusive use of public transit buses, except in compliance with the directions of a peace officer or official traffic control device, with exceptions.
- 5) Requires a public transit agency, with the agreement of the agency with jurisdiction over the highway, to place and maintain, or cause to be placed and maintained, signs and other official traffic control devices, as necessary, indicating that a portion of a highway is designated for the exclusive use of

public transit buses and to advise motorists of the hours of operation of the lane as an exclusive public transit bus lane.

- 6) Authorizes the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and local authorities to designate portions of highway within their jurisdiction for exclusive use by high occupancy vehicles (HOV).
- 7) Requires Caltrans and local authorities to place and maintain or direct the placement or maintenance of signs and other official traffic control devices to designate the exclusive or preferential lanes to inform motorists of the applicable vehicle occupancy levels for highways within their jurisdiction.

This bill:

- 1) Clarifies local authorities authority to authorize vehicles other than public transit buses in a transit-only traffic lanes.
- 2) Updates certain references to “lanes designated for the exclusive use of public transit buses” to “transit-only traffic” lanes
- 3) Requires a public transit agency or the agency with jurisdiction over the highway to place and maintain signs and traffic control devices indicating that a portion of highway is designated as a transit-only traffic lane and require the public transit agency and the agency with jurisdiction over the highway to develop these signs and traffic control devices in coordination.

COMMENTS:

- 1) *Purpose of the bill.* According to the author, “Dedicated transit lanes incentivize people to use public transit by avoiding unnecessary traffic. Sustainable transportation utilization results in fewer cars on the road, less noise pollution, and healthier communities. California’s Vehicle code definition of public mass transit leaves out modes of transportation that can help cities meet their sustainable transportation and traffic-reduction goals, such as services that do not charge a fee. AB 971 will authorize cities to implement and manage bus lanes on their local streets, as well as incentivize local shuttles provided on a fare-free basis, commuter shuttles provided by transportation management associations, and private employee commuter shuttles.”
- 2) *Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and dedicated transit-only lanes make trips faster.* BRT is a high-capacity, lower-cost public transit service that effectively accommodates longer-distance passenger trips by designating a road or

highway lane for the exclusive use of public transit buses. BRT may include dedicated lanes, busways, traffic signal priority, off-board fare collection, elevated platforms and enhanced stations. This strategy has gained in popularity due to its success in reducing the time transit buses spend stuck on congested roads. Several public transit agencies in California are currently operating or constructing BRT projects utilizing exclusive bus-only lanes, including the Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District (A-C Transit), the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro), Omnitrans in San Bernardino County, the Sacramento Regional Transit District (SacRT), the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS), and the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA).

According to *Best Practices in Implementing Tactical Transit Lanes*, a guide produced by UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies, dedicated transit-only lanes have been able to improve peak congestion travel times by 20-28%. These lanes can produce dramatic decreases in the variability of transit travel times. Research suggests that reducing total amount of time it take a transit rider to go door-to-door by 5-15% can increase urban pike ridership by 2-9%.

Similar to BRT, other types of mixed use lanes in dense urban areas and high-traffic streets can increase transit speeds, reduce congestion, increase ridership, and increase person throughput. These types of lanes sometimes are more permissive and will allow private buses, shuttles, bicycles, and taxis in the lanes. For example, the City of San Francisco operates over 43 miles of dedicated transit lanes exclusive to public transit and taxi use.

For both BRT and mixed-use transit lanes, state law requires local authorities and transit agencies to place and maintain signs that inform drivers about which vehicles are permitted in the lanes and at what times. These lanes are enforced through traffic signs, local police departments, transit agencies, and sometimes cameras. The Manual for Traffic Control Devices has approved signage permitting the use of other vehicles in transit only lanes, including taxis.

- 3) *AB 971 clarifies local authority to allow other types of vehicles in the lanes.* Even though some California cities, such as San Francisco, currently allow vehicles other than public transit vehicles in its transit-only traffic lanes, there remains confusion over whether only public transit buses can utilize these lanes, or if local authorities can authorize other types of vehicles to also use the lane.

The City of Mountain View, the sponsor of AB 971, would like to allow use of its planned dedicated transit lanes for public transit, free shuttle services provided by nonprofits, and high occupancy private shuttles in order to increase

the use of these types of shared-ride services. The city is currently working on the Shoreline Boulevard Reversible Bus Lane project to ease commutes to and from the North Bayshore neighborhood, without adding any additional roadway capacity. The project will add a dedicated reversible bus lane in the median of Shoreline Boulevard, with traffic signals, median bus stops, and curb protected bike lanes.

Specifically, Mountain View is planning to allow the use of the transit-only traffic lane by its various operators, including VTA buses; MVgo shuttles, operated by the city; the Mountain View Community Shuttle, a free fare shuttle service; and private commute shuttles operated by Google and other North Bayshore companies. These private commute shuttles comprise 30% of Mountain View's peak traffic along the Shoreline Boulevard corridor.

AB 971 updates references to the "exclusive use of public transit buses" to reflect the newer definition of "transit-only traffic lane," which states that the lanes are restricted to mass transit vehicles, and other designated vehicles, including taxis and vanpools, during posted times. Additionally, the bill updates the requirements for the signage to be installed on the lanes, to be developed in coordination with the public transit agency and the agency with jurisdiction over the highway, such as a city or Caltrans.

According to Streets for All, writing in support of the bill, "Dedicated transit lanes incentivize people to use public transit by avoiding unnecessary traffic. Sustainable transportation utilization results in fewer cars on the road, less noise pollution, and healthier communities. It is estimated that public transportation in the US saves 37 million metric tons of carbon dioxide annually.

"To incentivize high occupancy vehicle travel, cities are undertaking projects to implement and expand reversible dedicated transit lanes. These lanes allow traffic on multi-lane roads to be changed to accommodate heavy traffic moving in one direction at certain times and the opposite direction at others.

"This reform will authorize cities to implement and manage bus lanes on their local streets, as well as incentivize use of local shuttles provided on a fare-free basis, commuter shuttles provided by transportation management associations, and private employee commuter shuttles."

RELATED/PREVIOUS LEGISLATION:

AB 917 (Bloom, Chapter 709, Statutes of 2021) -- Authorized all public transit operators to install automated forward-facing parking control devices on transit

vehicles for the purposes of enforcing parking violations occurring in transit-only traffic lanes and at transit stops and stations.

SB 998 (Wieckoski, Chapter 716, Statutes of 2016) -- Prohibited an individual from operating, stopping, parking or leaving a motor vehicle in a portion of the highway designated exclusively for public transit buses, except in specific circumstances, and requires signs be erected to identify these lanes.

FISCAL EFFECT: Appropriation: No Fiscal Com.: No Local: No

POSITIONS: (Communicated to the committee before noon on Wednesday, Wednesday, June 7, 2023.)

SUPPORT:

City of Mountain View (sponsor)
City of Fremont
City of Redwood City
City of San Jose
Streets for All

OPPOSITION:

None received

-- END --