SENATE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION
Senator Dave Cortese, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No:	SB 1246	**Hearing Date:**	4/7/2026
Author:	Cortese		
Version:	3/24/2026 Amended		
Urgency:	No	**Fiscal:**	Yes
Consultant:	Manny Leon & Samuel Myers		

SUBJECT: Autonomous vehicles

DIGEST: This bill provides a number of requirements for autonomous vehicle (AV) operators and autonomous passenger service vehicles pertaining to remote assistants, drivers, and local incident technicians, and further provides requirements pertaining to emergency response procedures, manual override systems, data management, as specified.

ANALYSIS:

Existing law:

1) Authorizes the operation of AVs on public roads for testing purposes under certain circumstances specified in the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) regulations.

2) Defines "autonomous vehicle" to mean vehicle equipped with technology that makes it capable of operation that meets the definition of Levels 3, 4, or 5 of the Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE) International's Taxonomy and Testing of Autonomous Vehicles Definitions for Terms Related to Driving Automation Systems for On-Road Motor Vehicles, standard J3016 (APR 2021).

3) Defines "autonomous technology" to mean technology that has the capability to drive a vehicle without the active physical control or monitoring by a human operator.

4) Prohibits the operation of AVs on public roads for non-testing purposes unless the manufacturer of the vehicles submits an application to DMV that is approved pursuant to DMV regulations.

5) Requires DMV to approve an application submitted by a manufacturer for the operation of AVs for non-testing purposes if DMV finds that the applicant has

submitted all information and completed testing necessary to satisfy that the AVs are safe to operate on public roads and the applicant has complied with all requirements specified in DMV regulations.

6) Authorizes DMV to impose additional requirements it deems necessary to ensure the safe operation of AVs if those vehicles are capable of operating without the presence of a driver inside the vehicle.

7) At the regulatory level, DMV administers the Autonomous Vehicles Program and issues permits to manufacturers that test and deploy autonomous vehicles on California public roads, as specified.

8) Commencing July 1, 2026, requires manufacturers of AVs that operate without a human operator physically present in the vehicle, except as provided, to comply with certain requirements, including, among other things, to maintain a dedicated emergency response telephone line that is available for emergency response officials, as defined, and to equip each autonomous vehicle with a two-way voice communication device that enables emergency response officials that are near the vehicle to communicate effectively with a remote human operator, as specified.

9) Authorizes the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) to supervise and regulate every charter-party carrier of passengers.

10) Defines a charter-party carrier of passengers as every person engaged in the transportation of persons by motor vehicle for compensation over any public highway in this state. A charter-party carrier of passengers includes any person, corporation, or other entity engaged in the provision of a hired driver service when a rented motor vehicle is being operated by a hired driver.

This bill:

1) Makes findings and declarations pertaining to protecting public safety for Californians as the operation of AVs continues to grow throughout the state, as specified.

2) For provisions specified in this bill, provides various definitions relating to AVs, emergency response, remote operations, as specified.

3) Requires remote assistants, remote drivers, or local incident technicians, as defined, who monitor, direct, provide input to, advise, supervise, or control commercial autonomous vehicles on a public road in this state, or that provides

onsite response to incidents on behalf of an autonomous vehicle operator, be located within the United States and hold a valid California driver's license of the appropriate class with any endorsements required for a human driver to lawfully operate the same vehicle within the state, as specified.

4) For autonomous passenger service vehicles, requires the ratio of remote assistants or remote drivers to autonomous passenger service vehicles be 1 to 3 or higher at all times, as specified.

5) Requires an autonomous vehicle operator to ensure through its staffing and assignments that remote drivers or remote assistants are able to immediately respond to all calls and incidents and that local incident technicians are able to respond and be present on the scene within 10 minutes of an accident or receiving a request from a first responder, as specified.

6) Requires an autonomous vehicle operator to adopt and maintain written emergency response and immobilization procedures to ensure prompt responses to emergencies and accidents, as specified.

7) Requires any commercial autonomous vehicle obstructing a travel lane, crosswalk, intersection, transit lane, bicycle lane, freight corridor, emergency access route, space or ramp designated for disabled persons when not carrying a disabled passenger, or fire hydrant to be relocated or removed as soon as possible, but in no case later than 5 minutes after the obstruction is detected if the AV is driveable, or no later than 30 minutes after the obstruction is detected if field personnel or towing is required, except as specified.

8) Prohibits a commercial autonomous vehicle from interfering with emergency events, emergency operations, or law enforcement operations, as specified.

9) Requires any commercial autonomous vehicle operated without a human driver on a highway in this state to be equipped with a manual override system in the vehicle that allows local incident technicians, first responders, tow operators, and trained personnel to readily access an emergency steering wheel and manually steer, brake, and relocate the vehicle during an emergency, as specified.

10) Requires an AV operator to provide training and written guidance to local incident responders, first responders, and towing providers regarding the manual override system, including safe disabling, relocation, and communication procedures, as specified.

11) Requires the California Highway Patrol (CHP) to establish a registration process for entities that wish to contract with AV operators to provide local incident technician services, as specified.

12) Requires CHP, in conjunction with the Office of the State Fire Marshal, to develop uniform guidelines and requirements for the training and written guidance described above and would require CHP to approve all manual override systems, training, and written guidance developed by AV operators pursuant to the above-described provisions. Further authorizes CHP to impose fees sufficient to cover the cost associated with administering these provisions.

13) Requires AV operators to maintain specified data, including, among other things, information regarding assignments and staffing for remote assistants, remote drivers, and local incident technicians and response times and responses to emergency events, immobilizations, obstructions, accidents involving damage to persons or property, and requests from first responders.

14) Requires AV operators to provide summary statistics showing the number of incidents in which manual control of commercial AVs was necessary or control was exercised by remote assistants, remote drivers, or local incident technicians on a monthly basis to DMV and CPUC, as specified. Further requires DMV and CPUC to post the summary statistics on their respective internet websites.

15) Specifies that a violation of the above provisions are not crimes and would instead make violations of these provisions subject to specified civil penalties and administrative actions.

COMMENTS:

1) *Purpose of the bill.* According to the author, "Autonomous vehicles (AV) are operating on California's roads every day. When these vehicles stall in our streets, they do not just block traffic or public transit - they also interfere with first responders and other emergency operations. Currently, AV remote operators are not required to have a California driver's license and are responsible for dozens of vehicles at a time. Our firefighters, law enforcement, and first responders cannot afford to wait on understaffed remote operators to respond to dynamic situations. SB 1246 puts common-sense standards in place to ensure AV companies act quickly, trained personnel are accountable, and our first responders have the resources they need to keep the public safe."

2) *AV regulation in California.* Under California law, AVs are defined as being vehicles that meet the Society of Automative Engineers (SAE) Level 3, 4, or 5

standards. This includes any vehicle that, at a minimum, can conduct most driving tasks by itself under certain environmental conditions without human intervention. Importantly, Level 3, 4, and 5 vehicles do not include common vehicle safety features such as automatic breaking, lane keep assist, or adaptive cruise control. Vehicles with these systems are considered Level 2 vehicles under SAE standards, and thus do not qualify as AVs. This extends to what are commonly referred to as "Level 2+" or "Level 2 ADAS" vehicles, that package many of these features together to offer AV-like services.

In 2012, the Legislature passed SB 1298 (Padilla, Chapter 570) which permitted AVs to operate on public roads for testing by a driver under certain conditions. Since that time, AVs have been regulated by two state government entities. DMV regulates the testing, operation, and deployment of AVs, while CPUC regulates commercial robotaxi services. In order for any AV manufacturer to apply for CPUC robotaxi permits, they must first have full DMV permits.

DMV offers two different types of AV permits. The first type is a testing permit, which allows manufacturers to test AVs on California roads for internal research purposes. The second type of permits are deployment permits, that allow manufacturers to deploy AVs on California roads more broadly for both private and commercial use. Like DMV, CPUC currently offers two different permit types. The Pilot Program allows for non-commercial service for testing purposes, while the Phase I Program is what permits full, commercial robotaxi service.

Currently, both DMV and CPUC are undergoing new rounds of AV rulemaking. At DMV, the set of proposed regulations is aimed at authorizing new permit types and tackling existing safety concerns. Primarily, these rules will add a new permit type for heavy-duty vehicles, over 10,000 pounds in gross weight, for commercial purposes. The rules are also focused on expanding data reporting, especially for deployment permits, improving law enforcement interactions with AVs, and requiring proper licensure for safety drivers. At CPUC, the proposed rules will address the regulation of partnerships between AV manufacturers and regulated passenger carriers, the use of personal AVs in regulated passenger carrier service, appropriate regulations for Level 2 vehicles, and broader issues of passenger safety, including unaccompanied minors in AVs and shared passenger service.

3) *AV deployment in California.* Today a number of AV manufacturers operate in California, performing both testing and commercial robotaxi operations. According to DMV, 30 companies hold drivered testing permits, six hold driverless testing permits, and three hold deployment permits. Meanwhile,

according to CPUC, five companies hold testing permits for robotaxi services, and one holds full commercial service permits.

The company with the largest presence on California roads is Waymo. Waymo, a subsidiary of Alphabet, Google's parent company, is the first company to offer widespread, publicly available robotaxi service in California. Waymo has been providing this service in limited areas of San Francisco and Los Angeles since 2024. Recently, Waymo has been given approval by DMV to expand their service areas in these two regions. This expanded service, along with service in San Diego and Sacramento, is expected to launch sometime in 2026.

In addition to restricted service areas, Waymo is also limited in the types of service it can offer. Currently, Waymo can only operate on surface streets at speeds of under 35 miles per hour and cannot operate in and around airports. However, even with these limitations Waymo has amassed over 127 million miles of driving experience nationally, including over 64 million miles here in California as of September 2025.

Beyond Waymo, three other companies are also operating or will soon be operating in the state. Tesla, although not technically an AV manufacturer, plays an outsized role in the space given their large public presence. Tesla's so-called Full Self-Driving (Supervised) Mode is not truly an AV system as it is only SAE Level 2. However, Tesla has still been heavily involved in advertising their vehicles as AVs and trying to enter the robotaxi space, taking advantage of the Level 2+ loophole, leading to a series of ongoing litigation with DMV.[1]

Nuro, although a long player in the AV space, has recently shifted operations away from full vehicle manufacturing to focus solely on AV software design. The Nuro Driver software is an SAE Level 4 AV system, and Nuro currently holds full testing and deployment permits with DMV, as well as Pilot Program permits with CPUC. Moving forward, the company's new focus is on a recently announced partnership with electric vehicle manufacturer Lucid and ridehailing service Uber. Under this arrangement, Lucid Gravity vehicles will be equipped with Nuro Driver software and used in robotaxi service on the Uber platform. The partnership aims to start services in San Francisco this year.

Finally, Zoox is an Amazon subsidiary that currently holds driverless testing permits and drivered deployment permits with DMV. While they have started full robotaxi service in Las Vegas, in California they are currently operating a free, wait-listed public beta in San Francisco. Zoox aims to begin full

[1] https://www.cnbc.com/2026/02/23/tesla-sues-california-dmv-to-reverse-false-advertising-ruling-on-fsd.html

commercial service in limited areas of San Francisco this year.

One additional AV company, Cruise, previously operated in the state but has since had its permits revoked by DMV. Cruise was originally permitted to operate 300 AVs in San Francsico. However, that number was cut in half in August of 2023 following a collision between a Cruise vehicle and a firetruck. During this same time frame Cruise vehicles were involved in a number of other incidents, including running red-lights, hitting buses, and blocking public rights-of-way. Cruise's permits were fully suspended in October 2023 after a Cruise vehicle struck, and then stopped on top of, a pedestrian.

4) *Remote assistants and remote drivers.* All SAE Level 3 and 4 vehicles (which include all AVs deployed in California), despite high degrees of autonomy, still require some level of human input. One form of this intervention is performed by remote drivers. Remote drivers take full operational control of a vehicle from a remote location, driving the vehicle as if they were physical present. However, the far more common type of intervention in California is done by remote assistants. These individuals do not directly control or drive the vehicle. Rather they provide guidance or assistance to the vehicle, often by answering queries or prompts from the vehicle itself. This is most commonly done when the vehicle encounters a situation the AV system is not fully confident about how to navigate. For example, remote assistants may help the vehicle route around an obstacle or check if objects were left inside the vehicle.

   Waymo, as the company with the most widespread AV deployment, currently makes large use of remote assistants. Notably, according to Waymo, they do not use any remote drivers. That is, all remote operators simply respond to requests sent to them by the vehicles. According to Waymo, these assistants do not passively monitor the cars, but only respond when a vehicle is in an "ambiguous situation." Waymo maintains that the AV system remains in full control of the vehicle at all times, and that the vehicle is not "stalled" while waiting for input from the remote assistant.[2]

   During a recent federal Senate hearing, Waymo revealed that it has about 70 remote assistants working at any given time. However, that hearing also revealed that about half of these workers are located in two different cities in the Philippines. The other half are located in Arizona and Michigan. This revelation has raised concerns that these assistants may not be fully familiar with California rules of the road. Concerns have also been raised that their extreme distance from the physical vehicles could cause latency issues in communicating with the vehicles, potential jeopardizing safety. SB 1246, in

[2] https://www.pcmag.com/news/waymo-has-70-remote-agents-but-they-cant-drive-the-robotaxis

part, seeks to address this concern by requiring that all remote assistants working with AVs operating in California must be physically located in the United States and hold a valid California drivers license.

5) *What is the correct ratio of assistants to AVs?* One ongoing topic of debate between AV operators, academics, and government regulators is about the correct ratio of remote assistants to operating AVs. When trying to answer this question many different factors must be considered, such as the frequency and complexity of assistance requests, the range of conditions in which the vehicles are deployed, the potential for lulls and surges in the request volume, the working conditions of the remote assistants, and the costs of employing the remote assistants.

   Academically, there is no agreed upon ideal ratio of remote assistants to AVs. Various studies have been done, but they have found a wide range of values, varying from as high as 1:2 to as low as 1:12. A recent study, based on experiments with remote assistants monitoring simulated AVs suggests that the ideal ratio is between 1:5 and 1:7.[3] The same study suggests that under some conditions this ratio could go as low as 1:9, however the authors warned that performance may suffer under surge conditions at that ratio.

   Data on the actual ratios being used by companies is difficult to obtain. Based on Waymo's self-reporting of 70 active remote assistants at any given time and their known fleet size of roughly 3,000 vehicles, it is estimated that Waymo has a ratio of roughly 1:40.[4] SB 1246 seeks to reduce that ratio by mandating a ratio of 1:3. However, as mentioned above, an ideal ratio is not currently agreed upon and many different factors must be considered when choosing what ratio to maintain.

6) *Emergency responder interactions with AVs.* Since the initial deployment of AVs in California, interactions between emergency responders and AVs has been a major point of contention. Primarily firefighters and police officers, but EMTs and other first responders, have reported numerous issues with AVs, including an inability to direct them in emergency situations, AVs interrupting emergency response activities, and AVs freezing up and blocking vital roadways. Most of these reports come from San Francisco, where AVs have been operating the longest, but issues have been documented in all areas where AVs are deployed. Specific incidents have included an AV driving towards an active fire situation; an AV driving over a firehose and stopping, rendering the hose inoperable; AVs blocking narrow roadways preventing the passage of

[3] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563225001372
[4] https://waymo.com/blog/shorts/advice-not-control-the-role-of-remote-assistance/

firetrucks[5]; and an AV driving into the middle of an active shooter incident[6]. Beyond these issues, AVs that have frozen in place have also caused significant traffic disruptions by blocking streets and roadways. Most notably this occurred in San Francisco in December 2025 when a city-wide power outage disabled traffic lights, causing over a thousand Waymo vehicles to freeze.[7]

In an attempt to resolve these issues, Waymo has begun operating a hotline for emergency responders. If emergency responders are dealing with an issue with a Waymo vehicle, they can call the hotline and speak to a remote assistant who can help resolve the situation. However, first responders have reported difficulty using the hotline, citing extremely long wait times and an inability for remote assistants to rectify the situation on the ground. Waymo has also begun to make use of local incident technicians, who are individuals who can physically respond to the scene of an incident. However, little information is available about these individuals, including how many there are, their average response time, or even if they are direct Waymo employees or third-party contractors.

In response to these concerns, in 2024, the Legislature passed AB 1777 (Ting, Chapter 682, Statutes of 2024), which required that all AVs operated in California be equipped with a 2-way voice communication device enabling emergency responders to directly contact a remote operator. However, the provisions enacted in this bill do not go into effect until July 1, 2026.

SB 1246 goes further in addressing the concerns of first responders by requiring that remote assistants can immediately respond to emergency responder calls, that local incident technicians be on the scene of an incident within 10 minutes, and that a vehicle can be relocated in at least 5 minutes if towing is not required, and in at least 30 minutes if towing is required. The bill would also require CHP to establish a registration process for third party entities who perform remote driving, remote assistance, and local incident technician services. Finally, the bill would also require that all AVs be equipped with manual controls that can be utilized by emergency responders to relocate an AV when necessary.

7) *AV accident reporting requirements.* Another major issue with AVs relates to the reporting of accidents and accident-related data. Right now, there is no clear standard on this type of data reporting, which has allowed for wide

[5] https://missionlocal.org/2023/08/cruise-waymo-autonomous-vehicle-robot-taxi-driverless-car-reports-san-francisco/
[6] https://www.ksat.com/news/texas/2026/03/10/questions-about-self-driving-cars-amplify-after-one-blocked-an-ambulance-responding-to-austin-shooting/
[7] https://sfstandard.com/2026/03/03/waymo-san-francisco-december-blackout-stalled-cars-hearing/

discrepancies in how various companies handle these issues. For example, Waymo tends to report incidents to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHSTA) with narrative descriptions of the incidents and makes certain data available after the fact. In contrast, Tesla often redacts its NHSTA reports and releases little information. Notably, Tesla has often fought the release of accident related data in court.

Although not a primary focus of the bill, SB 1246 seeks to close some of these reporting gaps by mandating that AV operators maintain certain records pertaining various AV incidents, requiring that the data be provided to CPUC upon request, and requiring monthly reporting of summary statistics on vehicle incidents. However, the bill does not specify particular types of accident data or have any public reporting requirements. Additionally, most data transparency concerns recently have been raised in regards to Tesla, which would not be considered an AV operator under SB 1246.

8) *Coordination among state agencies.* As AV deployment has expanded across California, some stakeholders have raised concerns about the bifurcation of regulating authority across multiple state agencies. As mentioned above, DMV regulates the vehicles themselves, while CPUC regulates robotaxi services. Opponents have argued that this creates confusion and potential gaps in regulatory enforcement, as well as leading to coordination problems between the agencies. SB 1246 would further split AV regulatory responsibility by requiring CHP and the Office of the State Fire Marshal to regulate the registration and training of remote drivers, remote assistants, and local incident technicians.

9) *Possibility of federal preemption.* In February, HR 7390, also called the SELF DRIVE Act, was introduced in the United States House of Representatives. This bill is aimed at establishing a national framework for AV regulation. Some of the included provisions are in-line with the goals of SB 1246, such as establishing a more robust accident data reporting system. However, other provisions directly contradict elements of SB 1246. For example, the SELF DRIVE Act would specifically allow SAE Level 4 and 5 vehicles to *not* have manual controls, rather than explicitly requiring them. Most notably though, the SELF DRIVE act contains an explicit pre-emption of all state and local AV laws and regulations, establishing full federal control over the issue.

It is currently unclear if the SELF DRIVE act is likely to become law. However, similar provisions, including the federal preemption, have been included in other proposed legislation. Thus, it is likely that these provisions

will continue to be considered in federal legislation moving forward, regardless of the fate of the SELF DRIVE act itself.

RELATED/PREVIOUS LEGISLATION:

AB 33 (Aguiar-Curry, 2025) – Would have prohibited an AV without a human operator from delivering commercial goods directly to a residence or to a business for its use or retail sale. *This bill was placed on the Senate Inactive File on the Senate Floor.*

AB 2286 (Aguiar-Curry, 2024) – Would have restricted an AV with a gross vehicle weight (GVW) of 10,001 pounds or more from being operated on public roads for testing purposes, transporting goods, or transporting passengers without a human safety operator physically present in the AV at the time of operation. *This bill was vetoed by Governor Newsom.*

AB 3061 (Haney, 2024) – Would have required the manufacturers of AVs to report to DMV any vehicle collision, traffic violation, or disengagement, or the assault or harassment of any passenger or safety driver that involves a manufacturer's vehicle in California starting July 31, 2025. *This bill was vetoed by Governor Newsom.*

SB 915 (Cortese, 2024) – Would have required local authorization for an AV commercial passenger service to operate within its limits. *This bill was held in the Assembly Transportation Committee.*

AB 1777 (Ting, Chapter 682, Statues of 2024) – Placed a variety of safety requirements on manufactures of AVs by July 1, 2026 and further authorized a peace officer to issue a "notice of autonomous vehicle noncompliance" for a violation of the Vehicle Code or a local traffic ordinance to an AV manufacturer.

AB 96 (Kalra, Chapter 419, Statutes of 2023) – Required a public transit employer to provide written notice to an exclusive representative of the workforce affected by autonomous transit vehicle technology, and that collective bargaining commence within a certain timeframe, among other provisions.

AB 316 (Aguiar-Curry, 2023) – Was substantially similar to AB 2286. *This bill was vetoed by Governor Newsom.*

SB 1298 (Padilla, Chapter 570, Statutes of 2012) – Established conditions for the operation of AVs upon public roadways.

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

POSITIONS: (Communicated to the committee before noon on Wednesday, April 1, 2026.)

SUPPORT:

California State Council of Service Employees International Union (SEIU California) (Sponsor)
California Association of Highway Patrolmen
California Conference Board of the Amalgamated Transit Union
California Labor Federation, Afl-cio
California Professional Firefighters
California Safety and Legislative Board, Smart – Transportation Division (smart – Td)
Teamsters California

OPPOSITION:

Autonomous Vehicle Industry Association
Aurora
Bay Area Council
Bot Auto
CalChamber
Chamber of Progress
EMA – Truck and Engine Manufacturers Association
Gatik
Kodiak
Silicon Valley Leadership Group
Stack
TechNet
Volvo Group North America
Waabi

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