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# SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Sabrina Cervantes, Chair  
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

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## SB 1246 (Cortese) - Autonomous vehicles

**Version:** March 24, 2026

**Urgency:** No

**Hearing Date:** May 4, 2026

**Policy Vote:** TRANS. 8 - 3, JUD. 9 - 3

**Mandate:** No

**Consultant:** Mark McKenzie

**Bill Summary:** SB 1246 would impose new requirements on autonomous vehicle (AV) operators and autonomous passenger service vehicles related to remote assistants, drivers, local incident technicians, emergency response procedures, manual override systems, and data management, as specified.

### Fiscal Impact:

- The Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) would incur one-time costs, likely in the range of \$115,000, to develop and adopt regulations related to new requirements imposed on AV operators. Requirements to post specified summary statistics reported by AV operators on its website would be minor and absorbable. (Motor Vehicle Account)
- The California Highway Patrol (CHP) anticipates ongoing costs of approximately \$17 million annually for 61.0 full-time PYs of new staff, and additional costs in the low hundreds of thousands of dollars annually for software development and maintenance. Primary cost drivers include establishing and administering a registration and certification program for local incident technicians, reviewing and approving all manual override systems, and developing uniform guidelines and requirements for specified training regarding the use of manual override systems. Staff notes that the bill provides CHP the authority to charge fees for specified activities, but it is unlikely that those fees could be set at a level sufficient to fully offset all of CHP's personnel costs. (Motor Vehicle Account)

**Background:** Existing law defines "autonomous vehicle" as a 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). Existing law authorizes the operation of AVs on public roads for testing and deployment purposes under certain circumstances specified in DMV regulations, and prohibits operation of AVs on public roads without DMV approval.

Existing law requires DMV to adopt regulations by January 1, 2015 setting forth the requirements for the application to operate AVs on public roads for non-testing purposes. In 2014 the DMV established regulations to authorize the testing of AVs with gross vehicle weights of less than 10,001 pounds with safety drivers. In 2018 the DMV established regulations to authorize testing of light-duty AVs without safety drivers. Light-duty AV regulations were updated in 2019 to allow for the testing and deployment of AV motor trucks (delivery vehicles weighing less than 10,001 pounds) on public

roads. In 2022 the DMV established regulations to authorize the deployment of light-duty AVs without safety drivers. The DMV indicates that 30 companies are currently authorized to test light-duty AVs with a safety driver, six companies are authorized to test without a safety driver, and three companies are authorized to commercially deploy driverless light-duty AVs. According to the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), which regulates charter-party carriers of passengers, five companies hold testing permits for “robotaxi” services and one (Waymo) holds full commercial service permits.

Existing law, as enacted by AB 1777 (Ting), Chap. 682/2024, requires an AV manufacturer, commencing on July 1, 2026, to comply with the following, among other things:

- To maintain a dedicated emergency response telephone line that is available to emergency response officials whenever the AV is operating on a public road.
- To continually monitor its AVs and to staff the emergency response telephone line so that calls are answered within 30 seconds by a remote human operator who has situational awareness of all AVs on the roads.
- To equip each AV with a two-way voice communication device that enables emergency response officials that are near the vehicle to communicate with a remote human operator who has situational awareness about the AV. An emergency response official must be able to reach a remote human operator within 30 seconds.
- Require the remote human operator to have the ability to immobilize the AV, allow an emergency response official to move the AV, or cause it to move as directed by the emergency response official.

AB 1777 also authorized an emergency response official to issue an emergency geofencing message to an AV manufacturer that requires the manufacturer, within two minutes, to direct its AV fleet to leave or avoid the area, as specified.

DMV announced on April 28, 2026 that new AV regulations were approved that cover both light-duty and heavy-duty vehicles. Significantly, the regulations authorize AV manufacturers to apply for permits to test and deploy heavy-duty AV technology on California roadways, opening the market to AV freight operations. The new regulations also implement the requirements of AB 1777, including the following:

- Establish a process for law enforcement to issue a Notice of AV Noncompliance to manufacturers when an AV commits a moving violation.
- Require annual updates to first responder interaction plans, access to manual vehicle override systems, two-way communication links with 30-second response times, and updated training requirements for interacting with first responders.
- Authorize local emergency response officials to issue emergency geofencing directives to AV manufacturers requiring them to direct their vehicles to leave the identified areas within two minutes of receiving a message.
- Establish standards for remote operations personnel, including licensing qualifications and permitting and training requirements for remote drivers and assistants.
- Update AV data reporting requirements related to system failures, vehicle immobilizations, and hard braking events, while also expanding collision reporting.

**Proposed Law:** SB 1246 would impose new requirements on AV operators and autonomous passenger service vehicles. Specifically, this bill would:

- Require remote assistants, remote drivers, or local incident technicians, as defined, who monitor, direct, provide input to, advise, supervise, or control commercial AVs on a public road in this state, or that provides onsite response to incidents on behalf of an AV operator, be located within the United States and hold a valid California driver's license, as specified.
- Require a 1 to 3 or higher ratio of remote assistants or remote drivers to autonomous passenger service vehicles.
- Require remote assistants, remote drivers, or local incident technicians to be registered with the Employer Pull Notice Program administered by DMV.
- Require an AV 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.
- Require an AV operator to adopt and maintain written emergency response and immobilization procedures to ensure prompt responses to emergencies and accidents, as specified.
- Authorize first responders to request that an AV operator dispatch a local incident technician to a commercial AV when necessary to address collisions, immobilizations, or obstructions, or to address any safety issue that requires the onsite presence of a local incident technician.
- Require an AV operator to adopt and maintain written emergency response and immobilization procedures to ensure prompt responses to emergencies and accidents, as specified.
- Require any commercial AV obstructing a travel lane, crosswalk, intersection, transit lane, bicycle lane, freight corridor, emergency access route, space or ramp designated for disabled persons, 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 drivable, or no later than 30 minutes after the obstruction is detected if field personnel or towing is required, except as specified.
- Prohibit a commercial AV from interfering with emergency events, emergency operations, or law enforcement operations.
- Require any commercial AV operated without a human driver 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.
- Require the manual override system to be approved by the CHP, comply with standardized controls for taking manual control over AVs, and allow activation by local incident technicians, first responders, tow operators, and other trained personnel.
- Require 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.
- Require the CHP, in conjunction with the Office of the State Fire Marshal, to develop uniform guidelines and requirements for this training and written guidance.

- Require the CHP to establish a registration process for entities that wish to contract with AV operators to provide local incident technician services, and to certify that all technicians meet the requirements of the bill, as specified. The CHP must publish a list of registered contractors on its website.
- Authorize the CHP to impose fees sufficient to cover the costs associated with administering these provisions.
- Require 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.
- Require AV operators to provide summary statistics on a monthly basis to the DMV and CPUC 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, as specified. The DMV and CPUC must post the summary statistics on their respective internet websites.
- Specify that a violation of this bill's provisions is not a crime and instead makes violations subject to specified civil penalties and administrative actions.

**Related Legislation:** AB 33 (Aguiar-Curry), which is currently pending on the Inactive File on the Senate Floor, would prohibit the delivery of commercial goods directly to a residence or business for its use or retail sale by an AV operating without a human safety operator, and require the DMV to impose administrative penalties for violations.

AB 1777 (Ting), Chap. 682/2024, required manufacturers that operate AVs without a human driver in the vehicle to maintain a dedicated emergency response telephone line and equip vehicles with two-way voice communication, and authorized an emergency response official to issue a geofencing message to a manufacturer who must then direct its fleet to leave or avoid an area. The bill also authorized law enforcement to issue a notice of AV noncompliance for traffic violations that occur when autonomous technology is engaged, as specified.

**Staff Comments:** The requirements of this bill would impose significant ongoing costs on the CHP to establish a registration process for entities that wish to contract with AV operators to provide local incident technician services, to develop uniform guidelines and requirements for training, and to approve all manual override systems, training, and written guidance developed by AV operators, as specified. The Motor Vehicle Account (MVA) is the primary funding source for the California Highway Patrol and DMV. The MVA has had a structural deficit since the 2021-22 fiscal year, with expenditures exceeding revenues by approximately \$60 million in the current year, and approximately \$112 million in the budget year (projected). Absent further actions to address the MVA fund condition, approving any new proposals that increase MVA expenditures would exacerbate the current structural imbalance of the fund. The Budget Summary published for the Governor's proposed 2026-27 Budget notes that "the MVA will be insolvent as soon as 2028-29. Given the ongoing fiscal constraints in the MVA, the Administration will continue to limit new workload or initiatives, including those with delayed implementation dates that would create additional cost pressures over time."