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THIRD READING

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Bill No: SB 1246  
Author: Cortese (D)  
Amended: 3/24/26  
Vote: 21

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SENATE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE: 8-3, 4/7/26

AYES: Cortese, Archuleta, Arreguín, Blakespear, Gonzalez, Grayson, Menjivar, Richardson

NOES: Strickland, Seyarto, Valladares

NO VOTE RECORDED: Dahle, Wiener

SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE: 9-3, 4/21/26

AYES: Umberg, Allen, Ashby, Caballero, Durazo, Laird, Reyes, Wahab, Weber Pierson

NOES: Niello, Valladares, Wiener

NO VOTE RECORDED: Stern

SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE: 5-2, 5/14/26

AYES: Cervantes, Cabaldon, Grayson, Richardson, Wahab

NOES: Seyarto, Dahle

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**SUBJECT:** Autonomous vehicles

**SOURCE:** SEIU

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**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, local incident technicians, 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 5 or higher at all times, as specified.
- 5) Requires an AV operator to ensure through its staffing and assignments that remote drivers or remote assistants are immediately dispatched in either of the following situations:
  - a) Upon notification, as specified, of an accident involving damage to persons or property; or,
  - b) Upon receiving a request from a first responder or 911 dispatch center.
- 6) Further requires an AV operator to ensure through its staffing and assignments that local incident technicians are present at the scene of an incident within 20 minutes of receiving a notification or request as provided above in (5), no less than 90 percent of the time.

- 7) 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.
- 8) 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.
- 9) Prohibits a commercial autonomous vehicle from interfering with emergency events, emergency operations, or law enforcement operations, as specified.
- 10) 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.
- 11) Requires an AV operator to provide manual override 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.
- 12) Requires the California Highway Patrol (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 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 braking, 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) *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.<sup>1</sup>

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 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.

- 4) *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 firetrucks<sup>2</sup>; and an AV driving into the middle of an active shooter incident<sup>3</sup>. 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pcmag.com/news/waymo-has-70-remote-agents-but-they-cant-drive-the-robotaxis>

<sup>2</sup> <https://missionlocal.org/2023/08/cruise-waymo-autonomous-vehicle-robot-taxi-driverless-car-reports-san-francisco/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ksat.com/news/texas/2026/03/10/questions-about-self-driving-cars-amplify-after-one-blocked-an-ambulance-responding-to-austin-shooting/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://sfstandard.com/2026/03/03/waymo-san-francisco-december-blackout-stalled-cars-hearing/>

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), 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.

This bill goes further in addressing the concerns of first responders and builds off of DMV's most recent regulations by requiring that remote assistants can immediately respond to emergency responder calls, that local incident technicians be rapidly deployed, 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. 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.

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

According to the Senate Appropriations Committee:

- 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)
- Unknown CHP ongoing costs, likely in the millions of dollars annually, for new staff to implement the provisions of the bill, and additional costs in the low hundreds of thousands of dollars annually for software development and maintenance. Primary cost drivers include 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 unknown whether those fees could be set at a level sufficient to fully offset all of CHP's personnel costs. (Motor Vehicle Account)

**SUPPORT:** (Verified 5/14/26)

California State Council of Service Employees International Union (Source)  
California Association of Highway Patrolmen  
California Conference Board of the Amalgamated Transit Union  
California Federation of Labor Unions, Afl-cio  
California Labor Federation, Afl-cio  
California Police Chiefs Association  
California Professional Firefighters  
California Safety and Legislative Board, Smart – Transportation Division  
California School Employees Association  
Center for Auto Safety  
Consumer Attorneys of California  
Consumers for Auto Reliability & Safety  
Impact Teen Drivers  
Kids and Car Safety  
National Safety Council  
Teamsters California

**OPPOSITION:** (Verified 5/14/26)

Alliance for Automotive Innovation  
Aurora Innovation, INC.  
Autonomous Vehicle Industry Association  
Avrs Group  
Bay Area Council  
Bot Auto  
Calasian Chamber of Commerce  
Calchamber  
California Alliance for Freight Innovation  
California Manufacturers & Technology Association  
Chamber of Progress  
Einride  
Flasher Barricade Association  
Gatik  
Honda  
International Motors, LLC  
Kodiak Robotics, INC.

Moia America  
Mountain View Chamber of Commerce  
National Federation of Independent Business  
Nuro, INC.  
Plus Ai  
Silicon Valley Leadership Group  
Stack Av  
Technet  
Torc  
Truck and Engine Manufacturers Association  
United Spinal Association  
Valley Industry and Commerce Association  
Volvo Group North America LLC  
Waabi  
Zoox, INC.

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