
UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Bill No: SB 1246
Author: Cortese (D)
Amended: 8/21/26
Vote: 21

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

SENATE FLOOR: 27-9, 5/27/26

AYES: Allen, Archuleta, Arreguín, Ashby, Becker, Blakespear, Caballero, Cervantes, Cortese, Durazo, Gonzalez, Grayson, Grove, Hurtado, Laird, Limón, McGuire, Menjivar, Padilla, Pérez, Reyes, Richardson, Rubio, Smallwood-Cuevas, Umberg, Wahab, Weber Pierson

NOES: Alvarado-Gil, Choi, Jones, Niello, Ochoa Bogh, Seyarto, Strickland, Valladares, Wiener

NO VOTE RECORDED: Cabaldon, Dahle, McNerney, Stern

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: Passed, 8/30/26

SUBJECT: Autonomous vehicles

SOURCE: SEIU

DIGEST: This bill provides a number of requirements for autonomous vehicle (AV) operators pertaining to remote assistants, drivers, and local incident technicians, and further provides requirements relating to emergency response procedures involving AVs, as specified.

Assembly Amendments modified certain provisions of this bill and revised them with new provisions regarding the duties and responsibilities of autonomous vehicle manufacturers when interacting with emergency responders involving commercial autonomous vehicles, including the creation of new civil penalties for the violation of these requirements. Further directs the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) and Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) with implementing new training and guidelines for emergency responders regarding these requirements specified in this bill.

ANALYSIS:

Existing law:

- 1) Authorizes the operation of AVs on public roads for testing purposes under certain circumstances specified in 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) Requires, commencing July 1, 2026, 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 in regard to protecting public safety for Californians as the operation of AVs continues to grow throughout the state, as specified.
- 2) Requires POST, in consultation with appropriate groups and individuals with expertise in autonomous vehicles, to implement volunteer training courses and guidelines for law enforcement officers on commercial autonomous vehicles, including:
 - a) Existing state regulatory standards;

- b) Standardized protocols for interaction with autonomous vehicles during an emergency;
 - c) Process for the issuance of a notice of autonomous vehicle noncompliance; and,
 - d) Input from companies operating commercial autonomous vehicles.
- 3) For provisions specified in this bill, provides various definitions relating to emergency, emergency response, remote assistants, and remote drivers, as specified.
- 4) Requires an autonomous vehicle manufacturer operating autonomous vehicles without a human operator, under penalty of having their autonomous vehicle operations permit revoked, to:
- a) maintain a dedicated emergency response telephone line that is continuously staffed by a remote human operator that can respond to calls within 30 seconds and has the ability to immobilize or move the autonomous vehicle, unless the vehicle has a gross weight over 10,000 pounds;
 - b) Equip each autonomous vehicle with a two-way voice communication device that enables communication with a remote human operator;
 - c) Equip each autonomous vehicle with an override system that allowed someone physically present to move the vehicle, and provide training on this system to law enforcement and emergency responders, unless the vehicle has a gross weight over 10,000 pounds;
 - d) Provide all necessary information to emergency response officials so that the manufacturer can appropriately receive an emergency geofencing messaging that contains specified content; and,
 - e) Within two minutes of receiving an emergency geofencing message, issue a direction to its fleet to leave or avoid the identified area.
- 5) Requires a remote driver to be located within the United States and hold a driver's license that is valid for vehicle operation in California, as specified.
- 6) Requires an autonomous vehicle manufacturer to ensure that local incident technicians are immediately dispatched upon receiving a notice of a crash or incident involving an autonomous vehicle, or upon receiving a request from an emergency response official.

- 7) Requires an autonomous vehicle manufacturer to immediately notify affected local jurisdictions in the event of a fleetwide emergency or system failure.
- 8) Authorizes emergency response officials to request that an autonomous vehicle manufacturer dispatch a local incident technician when a remote driver or assistant is unable to reasonably address a request.
- 9) Authorizes a local incident technician to coordinate with emergency response officials on behalf of the autonomous vehicle manufacturer.
- 10) Requires DMV to adopt guidelines, as specified, establishing reasonable response time standards for local incident technicians to be present at the scene of an incident involving an AV.
- 11) Requires a local incident technician to be able to relocate, turn off, or relocate an AV.
- 12) Requires an autonomous vehicle manufacturer to tow any AV which cannot be relocated when required.
- 13) Requires POST to develop uniform guidelines and requirements for the manual override guidance provided by autonomous vehicle manufacturers and authorizes POST to charge autonomous vehicle manufacturers a fee sufficient to cover their regulatory costs.
- 14) Requires autonomous vehicle operators to maintain records of response times of local incident technicians to various emergencies, and provide these records quarterly to DMV, as well as publish statistics on its website.
- 15) States that a violation of these provisions is not a crime, and instead establishes a civil penalty of up to \$5,000 for each violation.
- 16) Further establishes a civil penalty of up to \$10,000 for each commercial autonomous vehicle that causes an obstruction that interferes with emergency response for at least 30 minutes.
- 17) Requires a court to consider various factors, as specified, when deciding whether or not to institute a penalty.
- 18) Delays implementation until July 1, 2028.

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.

- 3) *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 have undergone several rounds of AV rulemaking. At DMV, current regulations are aimed at authorizing new permit types and tackling existing safety concerns. Primarily, these rules 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.

- 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.¹

Earlier this year, during a 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 vehicle could cause latency issues in

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

communicating with the vehicles, potentially 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 driver's license.

- 5) *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 firetrucks²; and an AV driving into the middle of an active shooter incident³. 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.⁴

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), which required that all AVs operated in California be equipped

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

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

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

with a 2-way voice communication device enabling emergency responders to directly contact a remote operator. The provisions enacted in AB 1777 went into effect on July 1, 2026.

SB 1246 goes further in addressing the concerns of first responders and builds off of DMV's most recent regulations by requiring that remote assistants and operators can quickly respond to emergency responder calls and that local incident technicians be rapidly deployed. SB 1246 also establishes clear civil penalties on autonomous vehicle manufacturers for failing to meet these standards, and institutes training programs and guidelines to ensure autonomous vehicle manufacturers and emergency responders can effectively cooperate in an emergency situation. Finally, the bill also establishes a wide-reaching framework to allow emergency responders to communicate with remote operators, remote assistance, and local incident technicians when AVs are involved in emergency situations.

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

According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee:

- DMV will incur one-time costs, likely of about \$115,000, to develop and adopt regulations related to new requirements imposed on AV operators (Motor Vehicle Account (MVA)). DMV projects MVA will have a structural deficit as of fiscal year 2027-28.
- POST will need to develop a training course or courses, develop guidelines and establish a process to review and certify AV manufacturers' manual override training and written guidance. POST estimates one-time costs of \$250,000 (GF). POST may be able to recover these costs through a fee on AV manufacturers.
- Potential court cost pressures of an unknown, but potentially significant amount (Trial Court Trust Fund (TCTF), GF). Although courts are not funded on a workload basis, increased workload creates pressure on the GF to backfill the TCTF. The Budget Act of 2025-26 included \$117.3 million GF to backfill the TCTF for trial court operations.

SUPPORT: (Verified 8/30/26)

California State Council of Service Employees International Union (Sponsor)
Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety
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 (smart –
Td)
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 8/30/26)

Abate-a-weed
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
International Motors, LLC
Kodiak Robotics, INC.
Moia America
Mountain View Chamber of Commerce
National Federation of Independent Business
Nuro, INC.

Palo Alto Chamber of Commerce
Plus Ai
Sf.citi
Silicon Valley Leadership Group
Stack Av
Technet
Tesla
Tier Iv
Torc
Truck and Engine Manufacturers Association
United Spinal Association
Valley Industry and Commerce Association
Waabi

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