

Date of Hearing: August 20, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 720 (Ashby) – As Amended July 17, 2025

Policy Committee:	Transportation	Vote:	15 - 0
	Privacy and Consumer Protection		13 - 2

Urgency: No State Mandated Local Program: No Reimbursable: No

SUMMARY:

This bill authorizes a local government to use cameras and similar equipment, referred to as an “automated traffic enforcement system” (ATE system) to automatically detect and record violations of traffic control signal requirements, such as running a red light, and subjects such a violation detected and recorded by an ATE system a civil penalty. This differs from current law, which authorizes a local government to use an ATE system for the same purpose, but makes a violation subject to criminal penalty.

Specifically, this bill, among other things:

- 1) Authorizes a local government—a city or county—to establish a program for traffic control signal enforcement that utilizes an ATE system, to be operated by a local department of transportation, at the limit line where a driver is required to stop, provided the program meets specific requirements regarding ATE system placement, signage and operation.
- 2) Requires the governing body of a local government that, after January 1, 2026, implements a program to use an ATE system to—among other things, and in consultation with relevant local stakeholder organizations, including racial equity, privacy protection, and economic justice groups—approve an ATE system impact report, to be made available for public review at least 30 calendar days prior to adoption by the governing body at a public hearing, that includes the following: (a) assessment of potential impact of the ATE system on civil liberties and civil rights and any plans to safeguard those public rights, (b) description of the ATE system and how it works, (c) fiscal costs for the ATE system, (d) whether potential deployment locations of the ATE system are predominantly in low-income neighborhoods and a determination of why these locations experience high fatality and injury collisions, (e) locations where the ATE system may be deployed and traffic data for these locations, and (f) proposed purpose of the ATE system.
- 3) Requires a local government, prior to installation of an ATE system after January 1, 2026, to make and adopt a finding of fact that the ATE system is needed at a specific location for reasons related to safety.
- 4) Requires a local government that operates an ATE system to develop uniform guidelines for the system regarding screening and notice of violations, processing and storage of confidential information in manners consistent with the requirements of this bill, and selection of location of ATE system installation.

- 5) Makes numerous and specific requirements regarding a local government's operation of its ATE system or contracting for those functions; privacy, confidentiality and records retention; and notice of violation and review and appeals options available to a registered owner of a vehicle that receives such a notice.
- 6) States that an ATE system is to capture images of the rear license plate of a vehicle that is violating the traffic control signal and, to the extent feasible, not capture images of other vehicles or drivers, and that a notice of violation shall be issued only to registered owners of a vehicle based solely on the evidence captured by the ATE system.
- 7) Provides that a violation of traffic control law recorded by an ATE system is subject only to a civil penalty and is not to result in the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) suspending or revoking the privilege of a violator to drive a motor vehicle or in a violation point being assessed against the violator, and sets several civil penalty amounts for a violation of between \$100 for a first violation within three years and \$500 for a third or subsequent violation within three years, and limits payment fees to between \$50 and \$100.
- 8) Exempts an authorized emergency vehicle from civil penalty and provides a person is not to be assessed a civil penalty if they are subject to criminal penalties for the same act.
- 9) Requires revenues from use of an ATE system first be used to recover program costs, including the construction of traffic-calming measures, and that a local government that uses an ATE system is to maintain its existing commitment of local funds for traffic-calming measures annually expend not less than the annual average of expenditures for traffic-calming measures during the 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23 fiscal years.
- 10) Requires a local government that uses an ATE system to offer to an indigent person, as defined, subject to civil penalty a diversion program and an installment payment plan and, for an indigent person or a person with specified low income, to reduce civil penalties by specified amounts.

FISCAL EFFECT:

- 1) The primary fiscal effect, for purposes of this analysis, is in foregone revenue the state would otherwise receive for criminal runnings of red lights captured by cameras that, pursuant to this bill, are instead civil runnings of red lights. Under this bill, the state would receive no revenue from a civil running of a red light, whereas each such violation that is a criminal violation results in the following assessments and fees, approximately \$286 of which goes to the state:
 - \$40—Court Operations Assessment.
 - \$35—Conviction Assessment Fee.
 - \$1 Night Court Fee.
 - Various assessments per each \$10 of base fine:
 - \$10 State Penalty Assessment.

- \$7 County Penalty Assessment.
- \$5 Court Construction Penalty Assessment.
- \$1 Proposition 69 DNA Penalty Assessment.
- \$4 DNA Identification Fund Penalty Assessment.
- \$2 Emergency Medical Services Penalty Assessment.
- 20% of base fine State Surcharge.

The committee has no basis on which to estimate either the number of jurisdictions that will implement civil ATE systems pursuant to this bill instead of implementing criminal ATE systems pursuant to existing law, nor on which to estimate the amount of violations that will occur under the civil system that otherwise would have occurred under the criminal system. Therefore, the committee is unable to estimate the amount of revenue the state is likely to forgo.

- 2) Annual cost pressures (General Fund (GF) or Trial Court Trust Fund (TCTF)) of an unknown, but potentially significant amount, to the courts in additional workload resulting from appeals of hearing officer decisions. It is unclear how many appeals may be filed statewide, but the estimated workload cost of one hour of court time is \$1,000. Although courts are not funded on the basis of workload, increased pressure on staff and the TCTF may create a demand for increased court funding from the GF to perform existing duties. The Budget Act of 2025 provides \$82 million ongoing GF to the TCTF for court operations.

The state would not need to reimburse any local costs resulting from this bill because any such costs would result from the locals discretionary actions and not from mandates by the state.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose.** The author intends this bill to reduce traffic accidents and deaths through the greater use of red light cameras by, primarily, subjecting a violation captured by such a camera to a civil penalty instead of a criminal penalty. According to the author, this change will have the effect of “easing insurance prices for drivers and creating a more equitable framework in a space historically associated heavily with bias and over criminalization.”
- 2) **Background.** Existing law allows a governmental agency to install and use red light cameras to record violations of traffic signals, provided the agency meets specified notification, location and operational requirements. Over the years, the Legislature has approved measures to strengthen and specify these requirements, generally with the intent of protection of privacy and due process, and with ensuring use of such cameras is in the interest in safety and not in the interest of revenue generation or some other purpose. As substantiated in the policy committee analyses of this bill, use of red light cameras may reduce red light violations, as well as related collisions, injuries and deaths, and cessation of use of red light cameras may lead to increased related collisions and fatalities.

In California, running a red light is a criminal offense (an infraction), which means, generally, the prosecuting agency must be prepared to prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, that

the person cited for running a red light committed the offense. In practice, this means a California jurisdiction that operates a red light camera captures images of both the license plate of the vehicle that runs the red light and the face of the driver of the vehicle. A violator is subject to a base fine of \$100, though, in practice, the actual amount such violator must pay is close to \$500 after the addition of surcharges and fees, as described above. A violator is also subject to DMV assigning violation points to the violator's driver license.

Several California jurisdictions that have operated red light cameras have ceased their operation, several citing the net financial cost of operating them. In 2011, the Los Angeles City Council ended the city's red light camera program, in large part because the city was unable to collect fines from the owners of vehicles that had been issued violations. As the Los Angeles Times reported at the time:

There has been an uproar in recent days from drivers who diligently paid their fines. Some drivers have unsuccessfully demanded refunds and contemplated the possibility of a class-action lawsuit to recover fines and fees that can top \$500.

Court officials have chosen not to aggressively enforce penalties for camera tickets when the recipient fails to respond. They note the tickets are mailed to a vehicle's registered owner, who may not be the person who committed the violation. The only potential problem for those who do not respond to the tickets, officials said, would be the appearance of a delinquent traffic violation on a background search of court files.

(See "L.A. City Council shuts down red-light cameras," Los Angeles Times, July 28, 2011.)

This bill leaves unaffected California law that allows a jurisdiction to operate an ATE system that issues criminal violations. However, it creates new law that also allows a jurisdiction to operate an ATE system that issues civil violations. Statute makes other violations of the Vehicle Code, like illegal parking, civil violations. Generally, the burden of proof on an agency alleging a civil violation is less than the burden such an agency faces when trying to prove a criminal violation. For this reason, many civil violations of vehicle code are said to be "against the vehicle, not the driver," meaning a citation is issued to the vehicle's registered owner, with ownership of the vehicle establishing guilt, unless the vehicle owner can prove otherwise.

Accordingly, this bill (a) requires an ATE system established pursuant to it to capture images of the rear license plate of a vehicle that is violating the traffic control signal and, to the extent feasible, not capture images of other vehicles or drivers, and (b) provides that a notice of violation shall be issued only to registered owners of a vehicle based on solely on the evidence captured by the ATE system. Presumably, this means it will be much more difficult to challenge a red light violation captured by an automated camera under the provisions of this bill.

- 3) **Prior and Related Legislation.** Recently, the Legislature approved use of systems to automatically detect and issue violations for excessive speed on California roadways. Specifically, in 2023, the Legislature authorized the implementation of automated speed detection systems on a pilot basis in the cities of Glendale, Long Beach, Los Angeles,

Oakland and San Jose and in the City and County of San Francisco (see AB 645 (Friedman), Chapter 808, Statutes of 2023). In 2024, the Legislature approved the use of such a system in the City of Malibu on the Pacific Coast Highway (see SB 1297 (Allen), Chapter 631, Statutes of 2024).

Similarly, this legislative session, the Legislature is considering approval of two proposals that would expand the use of automated speed detection systems. Specifically, AB 1379 (Nguyen) would add Sacramento to the list of cities authorized to establish an automated speed detection system on a pilot basis—the bill is in the Assembly Committee on Transportation—and AB 289 (Haney) would authorize the Department of Transportation to use speed detection systems on state highway construction or maintenance areas—the bill is in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

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