

SENATE THIRD READING
SB 720 (Ashby)
As Amended September 4, 2025
Majority vote

SUMMARY

Authorizes a local government to use automated traffic enforcement (ATE) systems to detect violations of traffic control signals, and differs from current law by authorizing a local government to use an ATE system for the same purpose and make a violation subject to a civil penalty instead of a criminal penalty.

Major Provisions

- 1) Requires that a violation recorded by the automated traffic enforcement system to be subject only to a civil penalty, and that the violation not result in the Department of Motor Vehicles suspending or revoking the privilege of a violator to drive a motor vehicle or in a violation point being assessed against the violator.
- 2) Requires automated red light systems to be placed in locations that are geographically and socioeconomically diverse, and at intersections where data indicates there is a heightened safety risk that warrants additional enforcement measures. The designated jurisdiction shall describe how it has complied with this provision.
- 3) Requires signage indicating the use of the automated enforcement cameras.
- 4) Prohibits a designated jurisdiction from reducing yellow light interval durations after the placement of the systems.
- 5) Provides for a fine to the registered owner of the vehicle of \$100 for the first offense, \$200 for a second offense, \$350 for a third offense and \$500 for all subsequent offenses. If an individual is indigent, as defined, the individual must be offered community service in lieu of the fine, or the fine is reduced by 80%. The fine is reduced by 50% if the individual makes up to 250% above the federal poverty level.
- 6) Authorizes a late fee of \$50 for the first offense and \$100 for subsequent offenses.
- 7) Provides that the revenue from the fines remain with the cities and shall pay for the installation of the cameras, the adjudication of violations, and construction of traffic calming measures to improve traffic safety. If traffic calming measures aren't deployed within three years the funds revert to the state for use in the Active Transportation Program (ATP).
- 8) Establishes that the photos, videos and administrative records shall be confidential, and that public agencies shall use and allow access to these records only for the purposes of the automated enforcement system. Limits on how long records can be retained are established and disclosures to others prohibited.
- 9) Provides that a person will not be subject to a civil violation if there is proof the vehicle was being used by someone sharing their vehicle in a personal vehicle sharing program or if proof of a copy of a police report indicating the vehicle had been stolen at the time of the violation, in addition to the existing provision for the owner of a rental car

10) *Incorporates changes from AB 289 (Haney) should both bills be enacted.*

COMMENTS

According to California Highway Patrol (CHP) data between 2013 and 2022 1,245 people in California lost their lives as a result of someone running a red light. Most of those deaths were people inside of a vehicle (974 of the 1,245 deaths). In that same time period, 6,872 people were seriously injured (more than 5,500 within their vehicle and 848 on a bicycle) by someone running a red light.

Red light deaths and serious injuries have been on the rise. In 2012, 106 people died and 467 people were seriously injured as a result of red light running. By 2022, that number has risen to 171 deaths and 927 serious injuries. Nationally 1,149 people were killed as a result of someone running a red light (red light running deaths are 27% higher than expected in California based on its population share).

Effectiveness of red light cameras: Automated enforcement for reducing red light violations has been shown to be effective. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), "Institute studies in Oxnard, California, and Fairfax, Virginia, reported reductions in red light violation rates of about 40% after the introduction of red light safety cameras (Retting et al., 1999; Retting et al., 1999). In addition to the decrease in red light running at camera-equipped sites, the effect carried over to nearby signalized intersections not equipped with cameras.

"When it comes to crash reductions, an IIHS study comparing large cities with red light safety cameras to those without found the devices reduced the fatal red light running crash rate by 21% and the rate of all types of fatal crashes at signalized intersections by 14% (Hu & Cicchino, 2017).

Previous research in Oxnard, California, found significant citywide crash reductions followed the introduction of red light safety cameras, and injury crashes at intersections with traffic signals were reduced by 29% (Retting & Kyrychenko, 2002). Front-into-side collisions — the crash type most closely associated with red light running — at these intersections declined by 32% overall, and front-into-side crashes involving injuries fell 68%."

Dangers of turning cameras off: A large number of California cities have turned their red light cameras off for financial reasons. Most recently, the Sacramento Sheriff's Department turned off 24 red light cameras in 2024 due to budget constraints. The City of Los Angeles turned off their red light cameras in 2011 as a result of the cost to operate and unfair adjudication of cases (see below).

An IIHS study compared large cities that turned off red light safety cameras with those with continuous camera programs. "In 14 cities that shut down their programs during 2010-14, the fatal red light running crash rate was 30% higher than would have been expected if they had left the cameras on. The rate of fatal crashes at signalized intersections was 16% higher (Hu & Cicchino, 2017). A study in Houston, which turned off red light safety cameras in 2011, found that camera deactivation was associated with a 23% increase in right-angle red light running crashes at the intersections that previously had cameras (Ko et al., 2017)."

Civil vs. criminal penalties: Twenty three states currently operate a red light camera program. Almost all of those states besides California treat red light camera violations as a civil violation without accessing points on your license. California has recently shifted towards permitting traffic

violations captured by automated enforcement to be civil and not criminal violations, including speed cameras, bus and bike lane parking enforcement cameras, and toll violations.

A criminal violation for running a red light in California results in a fine close to \$500 in most counties, in addition to other court costs to take traffic violator school to remove the point on your license. Two points on a person's license can result in a 20% increase in insurance rates, and four points can result in a suspension of a person's license.

As a result of the violation being criminal, the state has to prove beyond a reasonable doubt who is behind the wheel at the time of the violation (this has resulted in individuals covering their face to avoid a red light camera ticket). Failing to appear in court for any violation, including a traffic infraction, is a misdemeanor with an additional \$300 civil penalty. As a result, several county court houses have felt uncomfortable enforcing red light camera violations because there is insufficient evidence that the person has notice of the violation and knows they have to appear in court. The City of Los Angeles removed their red light camera program in part because the city council felt uncomfortable with the notion that only people without knowledge of this fact were paying for red light camera violations.

This bill authorizes a city to issue a civil violation instead of a criminal violation and to utilize the same enforcement system as a parking ticket. The violation is against the car, not the driver. This bill creates a process for non-liability for rental cars. Points will not be assessed against the owner of the vehicle, aligned with most states that operate red light cameras. A two month warning period will be in effect when the new cameras start issuing tickets. Low-income violators will be provided the opportunity to reduce the cost of their tickets. No points will be assessed against a violator which is consistent with other states that issue red light camera violations. Unlike a traditional criminal ticket, cities will retain all of the revenue from the red light camera ticket. However, cities will only be able to use the tickets to pay for the cost of the program and traffic safety features to make roads safer.

Red light camera abuse by cities. The red light camera program had a rocky history in California leading to the perception that camera enforcement was designed for revenue and not for safety purposes. SB 667 (Peace), Chapter 496, Statutes of 2001 required that at intersections with an automated enforcement system the minimum yellow light change intervals are established in accordance with the MUTCD. This was a result of a report released by the Red Light Camera Defense Team, which evaluated San Diego's red light camera program and found that the city was installing red lights at intersections with extremely short yellow lights and high traffic volume. One camera was installed in the city at an intersection that had a single collision, but was generating more than \$6.7 million in fine revenue in part because of the shortened yellow light.

According to the Author

"Every year, roughly 4,000 people lose their lives to unsafe driving on California streets. SB 720 establishes the Safer Streets Act, which is a critical step towards reducing traffic accidents and fatalities. This bill allows cities to opt in to a new red light camera system in high collision areas. SB 720 changes the violation from a criminal penalty to a civil penalty - easing insurance prices for drivers and creating a more equitable framework in a space historically associated heavily with bias and over criminalization. The Safer Streets Act ensures that revenue generated from the new program funds local safety initiatives, including vital road infrastructure improvements. SB 720 ensures that cities have the tools to create safer streets and to invest in local pedestrian and motorist safety measures."

Arguments in Support

Streets are for Everyone, *the sponsors of this bill*, argue "SB 720 would establish an opt-in red light camera program for local jurisdictions to use called the Safer Streets Program, which is designed to save lives, improve privacy and security, and eliminate costly fines. The Safer Streets Program would issue civil violations (similar to a parking ticket) to the owners of vehicles that run red lights. It wouldn't affect one's driving record and wouldn't result in higher insurance. It has stronger privacy provisions since a photo of the driver's face is no longer required. It also has a way for low-income drivers to reduce their fines automatically. Any profit generated by the Safer Streets Program must first be used for program cost recovery and any remaining funds can only be utilized for safer streets initiatives, including pedestrian, cyclist, and vehicle safety improvements."

Arguments in Opposition

The National Motorist Association, *writing in opposition of this bill*, argue "SB-720 transforms red-light camera programs into high-volume, low-oversight ticketing operations. Camera vendors benefit from reduced operational costs—no need to identify drivers or prepare evidence—and cities benefit from a steady revenue stream. As past program data shows, jurisdictions tend to increase ticket volume by targeting minor violations rather than dangerous behavior. Cities that don't generate enough revenue through these tactics often end their programs, confirming that financial viability—not safety—is the driving force."

FISCAL COMMENTS

- 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:
 - a. \$40—Court Operations Assessment.
 - b. \$35—Conviction Assessment Fee.
 - c. \$1 Night Court Fee.
 - d. Various assessments per each \$10 of base fine:
 - i. \$10 State Penalty Assessment.
 - ii. \$7 County Penalty Assessment.
 - iii. \$5 Court Construction Penalty Assessment.
 - iv. \$1 Proposition 69 DNA Penalty Assessment.
 - v. \$4 DNA Identification Fund Penalty Assessment.
 - vi. \$2 Emergency Medical Services Penalty Assessment.
 - e. 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.

VOTES

SENATE FLOOR: 31-3-6

YES: Allen, Archuleta, Arreguín, Ashby, Becker, Blakespear, Cabaldon, Caballero, Cervantes, Choi, Dahle, Durazo, Gonzalez, Grayson, Laird, Limón, McGuire, McNERNEY, Menjivar, Niello, Padilla, Pérez, Richardson, Rubio, Smallwood-Cuevas, Stern, Strickland, Umberg, Valladares, Weber Pierson, Wiener

NO: Alvarado-Gil, Jones, Seyarto

ABS, ABST OR NV: Cortese, Grove, Hurtado, Ochoa Bogh, Reyes, Wahab

ASM TRANSPORTATION: 15-0-1

YES: Wilson, Davies, Aguiar-Curry, Ahrens, Carrillo, Harabedian, Hart, Hoover, Jackson, Lowenthal, Macedo, Papan, Ransom, Rogers, Ward

ABS, ABST OR NV: Lackey

ASM PRIVACY AND CONSUMER PROTECTION: 13-2-0

YES: Bauer-Kahan, Dixon, Bryan, Irwin, Lowenthal, Macedo, McKinnor, Ortega, Pellerin, Petrie-Norris, Ward, Wicks, Wilson

NO: DeMaio, Patterson

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 12-3-0

YES: Wicks, Arambula, Calderon, Caloza, Dixon, Elhawary, Fong, Mark González, Ahrens, Pacheco, Pellerin, Solache

NO: Sanchez, Ta, Tangipa

UPDATED

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