

- 4) Prohibits the removal of specific service signs placed before January 1, 2003, due solely to population growth in an urban area that results in a population of 5,000 or more but less than 10,000. (SHC 101.7(c))
- 5) Authorizes, despite the 5,000 person population limit, the placement of specific service signs along SR 65 within or on exits leading to the City of Lincoln. (SHC 101.7(c))
- 6) Authorizes, despite the 5,000 person population limit, the placement of specific service signs along Interstate 80 within or on exits leading to the City of Truckee. (SHC 101.7(c))
- 7) Requires Caltrans to prepare a report for the Senate and Assembly Transportation Committees on the implementation of the two exceptions to the population limit. This report must contain recommendations on whether or not signs should continue to be placed in urban areas with a population of 5,000 or more. (SHC 101.7(c))

This bill:

- 1) Authorizes, despite the 5,000 person population limit, the placement of specific service signs at two specified locations of SR 395 near the City of Ridgecrest, until January 1, 2037.

COMMENTS:

- 1) *Purpose of the bill.* According to the author “This bill provides a narrow exception to allow business logo signage along U.S. Route 395 at the China Lake Boulevard exit serving Ridgecrest. Ridgecrest’s essential services are not visible from the highway and are located several miles off the roadway, despite serving motorists traveling a remote 120-mile corridor with limited service options. The bill improves traveler awareness, supports fatigue mitigation on a rural highway, and aligns with prior legislative exceptions granted to similarly situated communities.

“Ridgecrest exceeds the population threshold and location from the highway as its services are located several miles off U.S. Route 395, making them ineligible despite serving a remote corridor with widely spaced fuel and lodging options.”

- 2) *General Service Sign Program.* Across the country, any device that guides, warns, or regulates motorists on public streets or highways must conform to standards promulgated by U.S. DOT under the Manual of Uniform Traffic

Control Devices (MUCTD). Each state is required to adopt their own state-wide MUCTD that must be “in substantial compliance” with the federal MUCTD. In California, the state MUCTD is promulgated by Caltrans. Both the federal and state MUCTD set forth a General Service Sign Program.

General services signs are white-on-blue signs and are intended to guide motorists to services that are not readily apparent to the driver. A typical general service sign is rectangular and displays an icon, such as a gas pump to indicate access to a gas station. Other services that can be indicated include, among others, hospitals, food, lodging, and electrical vehicle charging. Notably, general services signs do not indicate the specific name of the business offering the service identified.

- 3) *Specific Service Sign Program.* In addition to general service signs, California law and the California MUCTD set forth the Specific Service Sign Program. Established in 1992, the Specific Service Sign Program is designed to direct motorists not familiar with the area to specific services at or near rural freeway interchanges. Unlike general service signs, these signs display the logos of particular businesses located in the vicinity. Under the program, eligible businesses request to have a sign created and must pay for its cost. Caltrans then approves the request and erects the sign, in compliance with the regulations in the MUCTD.

The program is explicitly designed to serve rural areas, and by statute is only authorized in areas with a population of less than 5,000. Furthermore, according to the California MUCTD, “the use of Specific Service signs should be limited to areas primarily rural in character with adequate space for all signs to be properly accommodated.”

Specific service signs accommodate up to six logos per type of service, and only four signs may be installed in a single location. Specific service signs are also limited to only displaying gas, electric vehicle (EV) charging, food, lodging, camping, 24-hour pharmacy, or attraction services. Furthermore, each service type must meet specific requirements regarding the exact services offered, total operating hours, and distance to the highway in order to qualify.

- 4) *The City of Ridgecrest.* Ridgecrest is a city with a population of roughly 28,000 located at the eastern edge of Kern County. It is located several miles east of SR 395 and is the largest city along the highway. It also exists in the middle of a large rural area, where services are often few and far between. Ridgecrest itself offers numerous services; however the city is not easily visible from the highway.

Supporters of this bill argue that these conditions make it difficult for motorists to identify Ridgecrest as a potential spot to stop and get services. Notably, concerns have been raised that this creates unsafe conditions on the state highway as fatigued motorists push past Ridgecrest, not realizing they can stop in the city. Due to its population, the city is not currently eligible for the Specific Service Signs Program, however it should be noted that general services signs do currently exist along the highway near exits leading to the city.

SB 990 would make an exception to the population limit for the Specific Service Sign Program for the city of Ridgecrest. This would allow businesses to request, and Caltrans to erect, business logo signs along SR 395 outside the city. Specifically, supporters write that “Ridgecrest is working hard to strengthen and diversify its local economy but continues to face economic health challenges common to rural and high-desert communities. Businesses in Ridgecrest rely heavily on pass-through travelers along California State Route 395, yet many motorists are unaware of the services, restaurants, lodging, retail options, medical facilities, fuel, and other amenities available just minutes off the highway.”

- 5) *Implementation hurdles.* In addition to the population limit, there are other potential hurdles that would inhibit the placing of Special Services signs near the city of Ridgecrest. Most notably, both the MUCTD and the California Code of Regulations (CCR) (specifically 21 CCR 2111) mandate that any businesses participating in the program must be no more than 3 miles from the location of the signs. However, the majority of the business district in Ridgecrest is approximately 6 to 10 miles away from the proposed locations of the signs. Because this rule is stated in regulation, additional regulatory changes beyond the statutory changes made in this bill may be required to permit Caltrans to place specific services signs at the proposed locations.

Two additional hurdles are also potentially present. First, the MUCTD states that specific service signs may not be placed at “freeway-to-freeway” interchanges. It is unclear whether or not the proposed signs at SR 395 and SR 178 interchange would violate this rule. Second, Caltrans currently has a policy that they do not place specific service signs along conventional highways, which SR 395 is classified as. The two previous exemptions to the population limit, near the cities of Truckee and Lincoln, did not have this issue. Thus, Caltrans would have to implement a new policy allowing for the placing of specific services signs on conventional highways in order to meet their obligations under this bill. Such a policy is allowed by the federal MUCTD but

has not been done before in California.

- 6) *Safety, or economics?* Since the inception of the Specific Services Sign program, two specific statutory exceptions to the population limit have been made. These were done for the City of Lincoln (population of roughly 56,000) and the City of Truckee (population of roughly 17,000). In both cases, supporters argued that these signs, which display specific business logos, were necessary to support local businesses. In Lincoln this was spurred by the opening of the Lincoln bypass, driving business away from the city. In Truckee this was spurred by the removal of specific services signs in 2008, following a growth in the city's population. City leaders in Ridgecrest have also made similar arguments, saying their distance from the highway hurts local businesses, and that the addition of specific service signs would help ameliorate this effect.
- 7) *Recommendations against expansion.* As part of the legislation that created the population exceptions for Lincoln and Truckee, Caltrans was also required to create a report for the Legislature about the implementation of the exception and to make recommendations on further expansion of the Specific Service Sign Program. The report was released in 2019. At the time, Caltrans indicated they had received a request to place one specific service sign outside of Lincoln, and five outside of Truckee.

Based on these metrics, Caltrans recommended that the Specific Services Sign Program not be further expanded. This recommendation was based on a number of considerations. First and foremost, Caltrans expressed concern that visual sign congestion from too many signs could create the conditions for distracted driving and pose a safety risk. Furthermore, Caltrans emphasized that the program is not meant to take the place of traditional business advertising. In response to concerns that the removal of existing specific services signs were potentially harming local businesses, Caltrans at this time also issued a moratorium on the removal of all existing signs.

As noted, SB 990 would itself include an expansion of the Specific Service Sign Program for the city of Ridgecrest. Caltrans has recently indicated that they are willing to work with the city to address their particular concerns and to acknowledge the city's unique situation. For instance, Caltrans District 9, in which Ridgecrest is located, is currently working to revitalize the existing general service signs in the area. Caltrans has also expressed a willingness to provide necessary technical assistance to Ridgecrest as they navigate adding further signage in the future.

RELATED/PREVIOUS LEGISLATION:

AB 1633 (Frazier, Chapter 158, Statutes of 2017) – Added EV charging facilities to the list of businesses eligible for the business logo sign program.

AB 223 (Dahle, Chapter 166, Statutes of 2015) – Allowed for the placement of business logo signs along Interstate 80 within, or at exits leading to, the City of Truckee.

AB 178 (Gaines, Chapter 131, Statutes of 2013) – Allowed for the placement of business logo signs along SR 65 within, or at exits leading to, the City of Lincoln. The bill also required Caltrans to submit a report to the Legislature by January 1, 2021, on the implementation of the exception and to make recommendations as to whether the exception should be expanded to other urban areas.

SB 377 (Aanestad, Chapter 378, Statutes of 2008) – Required Caltrans to adopt rules and regulations governing signs for approved attractions, and added approved 24 hour pharmacies to the list of businesses eligible for the business logo sign program.

AB 1495 (La Malfa, Chapter 119, Statutes of 2007) – Required the department to add an “RV-friendly” symbol to any business logo sign for which the business requests the symbol and meets specified criteria.

AB 1923 (Dickerson, Chapter 576, Statutes of 2002) – Prohibited the removal of business logo signs placed before January 1, 2003, in any urban area where population growth has resulted in a population of more than 5,000 but less than 10,000.

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

POSITIONS: (Communicated to the committee before noon on Wednesday, April 1, 2026.)

SUPPORT:

City of Ridgecrest
Ridgecrest Area Convention & Visitors Bureau
Ridgecrest Chamber of Commerce
Ridgecrest Police Department

OPPOSITION:

None received

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