

Date of Hearing: July 1, 2024

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

Lori D. Wilson, Chair

SB 936 (Seyarto) – As Amended June 20, 2024

SENATE VOTE: 36-0

SUBJECT: Office of Planning and Research: study: road safety projects

SUMMARY: Requires the Governor’s Office of Planning and Research (OPR), in coordination with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), to study and post it on its website by January 1, 2026 the 15 locations in the state highway system with the highest rate of vehicle collisions and projects that could improve road safety at those locations.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Assigns Caltrans the responsibility of operating and maintaining state highways. (Streets and Highway Code 91)
- 2) Establishes the California Traffic Safety Program (OTS), which consists of a comprehensive plan in conformity with the laws of this state to reduce traffic accidents and deaths, injuries, and property damage resulting from accidents. (Vehicle Code (VEH) 2900)
- 3) Requires OTS to provide a detailed presentation and a statement concerning the progress made in implementing the program and recommendations concerning possible legislative action deemed necessary or desirable to implement the program. (VEH 2905)
- 4) Establishes OPR to serve the Governor and the Governor’s Cabinet as staff for long-range planning and research, and constitute the comprehensive state planning agency. (Government Code 65040)

FISCAL EFFECT:

According to the Senate Committee on Appropriations:

“OPR estimates costs of approximately \$500,000, including one-time contracting costs of approximately \$308,000 and \$192,000 for 1.0 PY of staff time. (General Fund)

Caltrans estimates one-time costs of approximately \$125,000 for 0.5 PY of staff time to develop a methodology, collect and analyze data to identify top locations for collisions and crash potential, and develop a general list of counter measures for the study. (State Highway Account)”

COMMENTS: According to OTS, California continues to experience a road safety crisis. Projections from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHSTA) estimate more than 4,400 people were killed in motor vehicle crashes throughout California in 2022, or about 12 people every day. Early data from NHSTA for 2023 and 2024 estimates a year over year 5% increase in traffic fatalities. Across the state, traffic fatalities increased approximately 7.6% from 3,980 in 2020 to 4,285 in 2021. The increase of traffic fatalities in recent years led to the creation

of the Vision Zero Network—a collaborative campaign with the goal of eliminating all traffic fatalities and severe injuries while increasing safe, healthy, and equitable mobility for all. Today, more than 40 communities (including at least 13 in California) across the country have joined the Vision Zero Network.

Safety is the priority. The Legislature enacted in 1967 the California Traffic Safety Program, what is now OTS, to provide authority for the State to implement the requirements of national legislation. Each year OTS develops a Highway Safety Plan (HSP) to reflect current needs as well as detailing the planned use of federal funds. The HSP identifies problems, specific performance measures, proposed solutions, time frames and fiscal information on continuing and planned new grants which are designed to mitigate traffic safety problems.

The OTS has identified ten priority areas of concentration for grant funding; alcohol-impaired driving, distracted driving, drug-impaired driving, occupant protection, pedestrian and bicycle safety, traffic records and roadway safety, emergency medical services, police traffic services, motorcycle safety, and public awareness and education.

Additionally, OTS maintains online crash rankings for local streets and state highways within city limits so that cities can compare traffic safety statistics. These comparisons enable cities and OTS to identify emerging or on-going traffic safety problem areas in order to help plan how to combat the problems and to facilitate grant awards. The Statewide Traffic Records System (SWITRS) provides crash data, the Department of Finance develops population estimates, and Caltrans provides daily vehicle miles traveled (DVMT).

Last year, OTS started the “Go Safely Movement,” a call to action to raise awareness about the road safety crisis and to establish a strong road safety culture. More than 2,000 California residents filled out a community survey on their perceived traffic safety concerns and actions needed to make roads safer in their community that will help inform highway safety planning. The survey also called upon residents to sign up as a “traffic safety champion” and commit to being more engaged in traffic safety for their families and community.

In 2022, Caltrans issued a Director’s Policy on Road Safety (DP-36) that committed the department to a Safe System approach and reaffirmed the vision of reaching zero fatalities and serious injuries on state highways by 2050. Under the Safe System approach, Caltrans focuses on five elements: safe road users, safe roads, safe speeds, safe vehicles, and post-crash care. As part of the policy, Caltrans committed to prioritizing safety in highway planning, operation, construction, and maintenance, to focus on eliminating the most serious crashes rather than all crashes, and eliminating disparities in road safety outcomes.

Last year Caltrans released their Road Safety Action Plan designed to review and track progress towards aligning Caltrans policies and practices with the Safe Systems approach. One step that was taken was to update the safety project prioritization methodology in the federally funded Highway Safety Improvement Program to better prioritize sites with the highest severity of collisions. Other goals planned to be completed by the end of this year include updating statewide planning guidelines to incorporate the Safe System Approach, developing a statewide decision-making framework for proactively identifying and prioritizing roadway safety investment, and developing trainings for project development teams on how to design safer roadways.

One key element of the Safe Systems approach is speed management to ensure that vehicles are traveling at safe speeds on the highways. One approach to reduce unsafe speeding is to improve enforcement of existing speed limits through the use of speed cameras or more traffic officers. Other approaches include traffic calming measures that encourage drivers to maintain a safer speed such as vehicle speed feedback signs, road markings that create the impression of reducing spacing on the road to encourage slower speeds, improved crosswalks and pedestrian signage, roundabouts, intersection barriers, road diets, curb bulbous, and speed humps. Caltrans' guide on traffic calming states that traffic calming strategies should be given increased consideration along safety corridors or roadway segments with a high percentage of speed-related collisions.

Delays in road infrastructure. The process to improve the State Highway System is forward-looking, but also protracted. Caltrans produces the Transportation Asset Management Plan (TAMP) every two years to assess the state of the physical assets on the national and state highway systems. Caltrans uses this information, along with information from its policy documents to create the State Highways System Management (SHSMP) plan, which is an operational plan that includes all major physical assets and deficiencies on the state highway system. The targets set in that plan then are used to establish the set of projects in the State Highway Operation and Protection Program (SHOPP), which is the state's "fix-it-first" program that funds the repair, preservation, and safety improvements on the state highway system. As such, the SHOPP and the projects Caltrans will be working on for the next four years are based on the SHSMP from five years prior. Therefore, policy changes, like implementation of the Safe System approach, can take a long time to have an impact.

According to the author, "In California, thousands of people lose their lives or suffer life-changing injuries in automobile collisions. In 2023, pedestrian deaths increased to their highest level in 41 years in California. A 2022 study from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) found disparities in the risk of travel for low-income communities and communities of color. From rural areas to urban cities, California streets are getting more dangerous for pedestrians and drivers alike. The scattered safety improvements across the state are only a temporary fix, ultimately increasing the burden and expense on road improvements, maintenance, and development in the long run. SB-936 will identify the top 15 locations in the state highway system with the highest rates of vehicle collisions, while assisting the legislature in understanding common delays in prioritizing road safety improvements."

In support, the Associated General Contractors write, "Safety is paramount to California's transportation system. AGC is a strong supporter of examining additional ways to address areas of highest collisions on the state highway system. This study could lead to helping accelerate necessary highway safety projects to improve the highway features in the identified prioritized locations, thereby helping to decrease traffic collisions quicker."

Committee comments. Given OTS and Caltrans' current efforts and prioritization of road safety, and existing data collection, it is unclear what this bill will add that is different or valuable. While perhaps providing an independent perspective, OPR will likely use Caltrans and OTS data in compiling the required components of this report.

Previous legislation. AB 43 (Friedman), Chapter 690, Statutes of 2021 grants the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and local authorities greater flexibility in setting speed limits based on recommendations the Zero Traffic Fatality Task Force (Task Force) made in January 2020.

AB 2363 (Friedman), Chapter 650, Statutes of 2018 requires the Secretary of Transportation to establish and convene the Zero Traffic Fatalities Task Force, on or before, July 1, 2019, and prepare and submit a report of findings based on the efforts of this task force by January 1, 2020.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Associated General Contractors of California
Streets for All

Opposition

None on file

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