

Date of Hearing: March 24, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION
Lori D. Wilson, Chair
AB 612 (Rogers) – As Introduced February 13, 2025

SUBJECT: Transportation: Highway Design Manual: emergency response times

SUMMARY: Requires the Department of Transportation (Caltrans) to update the Highway Design Manual (HDM) to direct local governments to consult with local fire departments when making road improvements to ensure they do not negatively impact emergency response times.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes Caltrans and provides that it has full possession and control of all state highways and property and rights in property acquired for state highway purposes, construct all state highways. (Streets and Highways Code Section (SHC) 90)
- 2) Establishes a duty of Caltrans to plan, design, construct, operate, and maintain transportation systems that the Legislature has made, or may make, the responsibility of the department. (Government Code Section (GOV) 14030)
- 3) Requires Caltrans to update the HDM to incorporate the “complete streets” design concept. (GOV 14033)
- 4) On or before July 1, 2025, the department shall update appropriate design guidance, including the HDM, to incorporate design concepts for wildlife passage features and related standard plans and specifications as appropriate. (SHC 158.3)

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown

COMMENTS: Caltrans’ Design Division prepares the HDM and establishes uniform policies and procedures for the state’s highway designs. The Design Division maintains and monitors the project development process in accord with all applicable State and Federal laws and regulations, establishes engineering standards and procedures for application of standards on a statewide basis, approves exceptions to design standards, monitors project development related reports, and facilitates performance management and process improvement activities. The HDM reflects the latest standards at the state level, such as pavement flexibility, geometric design, and traffic interchanges. It is not a legal standard, but establishes best practices for the state highway system, and is used as the minimum standard for local government design.

The process to update the HDM involves an individual completing an HDM Revision Request Form online. Caltrans processes approved HDM revisions biennially, unless an urgent response is required.

Local governments design projects based on several factors including: community needs, environmental impacts, public safety, stakeholder engagement, state regulation and laws. In California, state law has played an important role in dictating local street design in partnership with local regulatory bodies and stakeholders. Similarly, the state’s Active Transportation Program (ATP), created by SB 99 (Budget), Chapter 359, Statutes of 2013 and AB 101 (Budget),

Chapter 354, Statutes of 2013 provides state funding for projects that promote active modes of transportation through biking and walking. In addition, the Complete Streets Act, AB 1358 (Leno), Chapter 657, Statutes of 2008 promotes projects that provide balanced, multimodal forms of transportation. These types of legislation have resulted in projects that include adding bike lanes on roadways and traffic calming measures such as building roundabouts.

A recent concern is that some transportation projects intended to support the state's environmental goals, may interfere with ensuring the fastest emergency response times.

Infrastructure designed for emergency response. The 2022 California Fire Code (CFC) is a set of regulations based on the 2021 International Fire Code that serves as building standard best practices for responding to fires and explosions, storage and handling of hazardous materials and devices, and hazardous conditions within buildings and surrounding premises. In California, the Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM) is responsible for implementing the CFC. The CFC provides specific compliance guidance to a fire code official for roadways connected to buildings, including the width of a roadway and traffic calming devices. Although the CFC indicates that a fire code official must approve road changes that may impact fire or rescue operations, this is specifically for road improvements as they are connected to buildings, not for roadways' design.

There are instances where local roadway projects have impacted response times of emergency vehicles. For instance, the City of San Francisco, added a roundabout at an intersection however the lane was so narrow larger trucks, including delivery trucks and fire apparatus had difficulty navigating the turns. The solution was to "run over" the curbs to get around it. In the City of Fairfield, a curved cement lane divide was constructed adjacent to a fire station, which limits the accessibility of emergency response personnel when exiting the station. Current law does not require local governments to consult local fire departments on road design projects. However, many local governments already do when designing their roadways. This bill requires Caltrans to update the HDM to require local governments to consult with fire officials on roadway projects to ensure that they do not negatively impact emergency response times.

Emergency response times and multimodal and traffic calming projects. Concerns have been raised regarding this bill's impact on roadway improvements intended to increase bicycle and pedestrian safety, which includes road diets, complete streets, and active transportation projects. In some instances, ensuring projects do not negatively impact emergency response times could require a local entity to design multimodal or traffic calming measures differently. Collaboration between local governments and fire departments provides a potential opportunity to consider both bicycle and pedestrian safety while ensuring that emergency response capabilities are maintained.

Additional concerns over the broad implications of the term "road improvement" and requiring local governments to consult with local fire departments on **all** road improvements have been raised. Road improvements can encompass resurfacing, restoration, and rehabilitation projects, which are essential for road maintenance, in addition to the construction of new roadways or multimodal improvements such as bike lanes. The author's office may wish to consider not requiring consultation for all types of road improvements and focus on those projects which may impact emergency response times on an ongoing basis.

According to the author, "AB 612 will create informed conversations during the road design process by encouraging local governments to consult with fire departments before implementing

changes that could impact emergency response times. Emergency response times are vital for saving lives, yet road modifications such as lane reductions or traffic calming measures may unintentionally impede fire department access. This bill encourages collaboration between local governments and fire departments, ensuring safety for all road users.”

Arguments in support. The sponsor California Professional Firefighters (CPF) writes “In some jurisdiction’s major road design elements or modifications have been implemented without an understanding of how they might impact emergency response times. It is most common for the fire department to arrive on scene first, an engine can be around 32’ long and 10’ wide while a typical ladder truck can be 48’ to 62’ long and 10’ wide. Given the size of the equipment needed to respond to emergencies in the community, things like round-a-bouts or elevated cross walks can make it more difficult to respond in a timely fashion but even more so if the responding personnel aren’t aware of a potential slow down so they can’t plan for a different route in advance”.

Firefighters from across the state have shared stories of encountering new road design elements for the first time while responding to a 911 call and trying to figure out the quickest and safest way to maneuver the engine, truck or ambulance to a scene. It is crucial that fire department officials are included and consulted with during the planning phase for any major road modifications that could impact emergency response time. AB 612 will establish a mechanism to ensure coordination occurs and road design elements are designed in a manner that considers the needs of emergency response officials in each jurisdiction.”

Arguments in opposition. Streets are for Everyone writes “Each year, countless lives are saved by emergency responders, and we acknowledge any delays in response time can have potentially harmful consequences. We also know that roads that are great for emergency response times are often dangerous for other drivers and vulnerable road users, resulting in more serious injuries and fatalities. Fire departments already have the authority to influence road designs to balance emergency response times with the potential to save lives.

Therefore, if local governments are directed to consult the fire department only about emergency response times and not balance this with the potential for lives saved due to the changes – slower roads, safer roads and roads that protect vulnerable road users, this bill could result in more lives lost which I’m sure is not the intent of this bill.

For these reasons, we oppose AB 612 unless amended. We respectfully request that the bill be amended to include a provision that mandates an analysis to ensure a balance between making roads safer, slowing traffic to reduce speeding, and maintaining efficient emergency response times. It is important that both safety and the timely arrival of emergency responders are effectively addressed and considered.”

Previous legislation. SB 1 (Beall), Chapter 5, Statutes of 2017 increases several taxes and fees to raise roughly \$5.2 billion in new transportation revenues annually, and augments the ATP, among other provisions.

AB 2344 (Friedman), Chapter 964, Statutes of 2022 requires the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), in consultation with the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) and other appropriate agencies, to take actions to address wildlife connectivity needs related to the state highway system.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California Professional Firefighters (sponsor)
AAA Northern California, Nevada & Utah
Automobile Club of Southern California
California Federation of Labor Unions
California Labor Federation
Peace Officers Research Association of California

Opposition

Bike East Bay
Bike LA
Calbike
California Walks
Coalition for Responsible Transportation Priorities
Families for Safe Streets San Diego
Kidsafe Sf
LA Forward
Move LA
Move Santa Barbara County
Napa County Bicycle Coalition
Pasadena Complete Streets Coalition
San Diego County Bicycle Coalition
San Francisco Bicycle Coalition
Shasta Living Streets
Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition
Spur
Streets are For Everyone
Streets for All
Traffic Violence Rapid Response
Walk Bike Berkeley
Walk Oakland Bike Oakland

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