



AB 43 – Setting Speed Limits to Enhance Traffic Safety

Summary:

According to the National Transportation Safety Board, speeding accounts for nearly a third of all traffic fatalities. AB 43 implements policy recommendations from the California Transportation Agency as outlined in the Zero Traffic Fatalities Task Force by providing for more flexibility on setting speed limits based on safety.

Background:

California has based its speed limits using a decades old process known as the 85th percentile. Traffic surveyors would measure the speed drivers were driving at and set the speed limit to reflect what 85% of drivers were driving at. At the time this was believed to be the safest speed.

Speed limits, however, are not set based on safety, but rather on the speed driver's feel comfortable driving at, and transportation experts today widely reject the notion that the 85th percentile speed is the safest speed. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), the National Association of City Transportation Safety Officials and California Transportation Agency (CalSTA) have all concluded we need to reform the way speed limits are set.

The faster a vehicle goes, the chances of survival in a car crash decreases tremendously, especially for vulnerable road users such as pedestrians, bicyclists, seniors and children. According to research conducted by AAA, a person struck by a vehicle going 32.5 mph has a 75% chance of surviving; the survival rate plummets to 50% if the vehicle is going only 8 mph faster. The survival rate is only 10% if the vehicle is travelling at 55 mph.

According to NTSB, Speeding is a factor in 31% of all traffic fatalities. Empty roads due to the COVID-

19 lockdowns led to a significant increases in speeding, with a corresponding increase in fatalities. According to the National Safety Council, vehicle miles traveled dropped 13% in 2020, but the mileage death rate went up 24%, the highest estimated year-over-year jump in 96 years. Over 42 thousand Americans lost their lives to traffic violence in 2020, and an estimated 4.8 million additional road users were seriously injured last year.

One of the proven ways to slow drivers down is to enforce speed limits. However, California law requires cities to conduct a speed survey every 10 years in order for a speed limit to be enforceable, even if no changes have been made to the roadway. In some instances, the lack of enforcement causes drivers to increase their speed further, forcing cities to increase their speed limits in order to enforce them. Los Angeles alone had to increase their speed limits on nearly 200 miles of streets just to enforce the speed limits they have.

Reducing speed limits has been shown to reduce both injuries and fatalities on the road. According to the University of California Institute of Traffic Studies, research has shown reducing speed limits on limited access roads by 5 miles per hour can reduce injuries between 8% and 15%, with some studies finding reductions as great as 28% and 39%. A range of research also suggests lowering speed limits may result in the number of fatalities dropping by 10% to 30%, with one outlier study showing an 80% reduction in fatalities.

AB 2363 (Friedman), Chapter 650, Statutes of 2018, required CalSTA to convene the Zero Traffic Fatalities Task Force to make recommendations to the Legislature on what reforms the state should make to change the way we set speed limits.

AB 43 (as amended on 3/22/2021):

- Requires traffic surveyors to take into account the presence of vulnerable groups, including children, seniors, the unhoused and persons with disabilities when setting speed limits;
- Permits cities to lower speed limits beyond the 85th percentile on streets with high injuries and fatalities, and ensures they will never again have to raise a speed limit on any road if there have been no design changes; and limits the need for updated traffic surveys on certain streets; and
- Provides for greater flexibility in setting school speed limits to protect children.

Support:

San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency
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