SENATE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND HOUSING
SENATOR JIM BEALL, CHAIRMAN
2015-2016 Session

Committee Policy On: **SPEED LIMITS**

Policy: The committee will not consider any measure that would result in changing a speed limit on a specific segment of highway or any class of highway without justification by an engineering and traffic survey (ETS).

Discussion: In California, as in many other states in the country, speed on streets and highways are regulated through the use of posted speed limits. The primary purpose of speed limits is to enhance safety by reducing the risks imposed by drivers' speed choices. By establishing an upper bound on speeds, speed limits help to reduce both the probability and severity of collisions. Second, speed limits serve a coordinating function such that the limit is set at a speed at which the majority of drivers tend to drive, thereby reducing dispersion in driving speed and the risk of conflict with another vehicle. Speed limits, when appropriately set, also provide a basis for speed enforcement.

Existing law establishes what are referred to as "prima facie" speed limits for specified circumstances and types of roadways, as follows:

- 15 mph when traversing a railway grade crossing, when crossing an intersection of highway if view is unclear or obstructed, or when driving in an alley.

- 25 mph on any highway other than a state highway that is in any business or residence district, in a school zone, or in an area with facilities primarily used by senior citizens.

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and local agencies are permitted to change these speed limits if done so in accordance with an ETS. An ETS measures prevailing vehicular speeds and safety-related factors including accident records and highway, traffic, and roadside conditions not readily apparent to the driver. Local authorities may also consider such factors as pedestrian and bicyclist safety and residential density.

A speed limit is generally set at or near the 85th percentile of the prevailing speed (*i.e.*, the speed which is exceeded by 15 percent of motorists). Establishing speed limits at the 85th percentile is based on the assumption that the majority of motorists drive at a speed that is reasonable and prudent for roadway and vehicular conditions.

This process helps to ensure that governmental entities establish speed limits that are fair and enforceable and not arbitrary. Exemptions to this policy damage the integrity of the speed limit-setting process, result in differential treatment of motorists in different areas, and create the potential for local governments to engage in activity for the sole purpose of generating revenue. For these reasons, this committee will not hear measures that seek to change the process for setting speed limits for certain road segments or types of roads.

Adopted by the Senate Committee on Transportation and Housing on April 7, 2015.