

Metropolitan Transportation Commission

April 23, 2025

Agenda Item 8b - 25-0634

AB 1085 (Stefani): Increased Penalties for the Sale or Manufacture of License plate Obstructions

Subject:

Support Assembly Bill (AB) 1085 (Stefani), which increases penalties for the sale and manufacture of license plate covers, tints and other products intended to shield license plates from detection.

Background:

California law prohibits the use of any object, device or coating that serves to obscure or impair the visibility of a license plate, whether to law enforcement or toll readers. Specifically, California Vehicle Code Section 5201 prohibits the use of any material or object that obstructs or impairs the reading of a license plate, whether by visual inspection or electronic means. Additionally, Vehicle Code 5201.1 makes it unlawful to sell or use a product specifically designed to obscure or defeat license plate recognition. Despite such restrictions, devices designed to obscure plates remain readily available for purchase in the Bay Area and throughout California, both online and in brick-and-mortar stores.

The base fine for violations is currently \$250 per item sold or per offense, though added penalties and surcharges can increase the total cost significantly. While enforcement agencies may cite drivers, the law also allows for action against those who distribute them.

AB 1085 aims to address the supply side of toll evasion by disincentivizing both the *manufacturing* and sale of license plate covers, tints and other products intended to shield license plates from detection. Specifically, it prescribes a tenfold increase in the penalty for selling such a device (from a \$250 base fine to \$2,500) and adds manufacturing to the prohibition. It also clarifies that license plate tints or shades that obstruct or impair the reading of plates by electronic devices, including those used on toll facilities, are prohibited.

The bill is scheduled to be heard in the Assembly Transportation Committee on April 21. Given the timing of the hearing and a request by Assemblymember Stefani for MTC to indicate its support in advance of the hearing, the MTC Chair and MTC/ABAG Joint Legislation Committee Chair authorized staff to communicate a support position pursuant to the Commission's

procedures allowing for expedited positions to be taken on urgent legislative items. Staff requests the Commission affirm a support position on AB 1085.

Recommendation:

Support

Discussion:

MTC estimates the Bay Area Toll Authority lost \$5.8 million in fiscal year 2023-24 because approximately 780,000 license plates were blocked or distorted, meaning electronic toll readers were unable to capture the plates. Of that total, an estimated 24 percent – or \$1.4 million – was due to plate covers, tints, or other obstructions targeted in this bill. The remaining cases were due to license plate alterations (e.g., duct tape over a digit) or physical obstructions like bike racks or tow balls. Note: Express Lane data is not broken out in similar sub-categories, so the impact assessment is more challenging and ongoing.

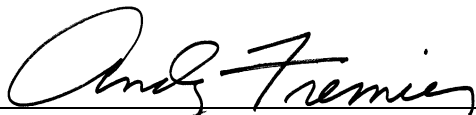
AB 1085 is a commonsense approach to reducing toll violations resulting from intentional obstruction of license plates by focusing on the upstream distribution of evasion devices. This is a pragmatic approach, given both the political challenges of increasing penalties on individuals and the practical limitations of enforcing violations one-by-one.

Known Positions:

No known positions

Attachments:

None



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