

BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Research Center
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C.S.S.B. 1919
By: Watson
Transportation
4/29/2015
Committee Report (Substituted)

AUTHOR'S / SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

Variable speed limit systems allow for the temporary reduction of speed limits due to congestion, inclement weather, traffic crashes, work zone activities, or other highway incidents. More specifically, variable speed limit systems use sensors to monitor prevailing traffic or weather conditions. These conditions are then used to calculate an appropriate speed limit, which is posted on electronic speed limit signs. In this way, variable speed limit systems can incrementally adjust speed limits to make the most of existing capacity by delaying the point at which traffic flows break down and stop-and-go conditions occur.

H.B. 2204, 83rd Legislature, Regular Session, 2013, instructed the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to implement a pilot program to study the ability of variable speed limit systems to improve safety during construction, congestion, and inclement weather. The Texas A&M Transportation Institute (TTI) assisted TxDOT in the data collection and analysis for this project, which began in the summer of 2014 with three locations in Temple, San Antonio, and Eastland County. Based on the pilot program results, TTI found that variable speed limits “had a safety benefit at each location.” Furthermore, TTI concluded that variable speed limit systems “would be beneficial if implemented to address inclement weather, congestion or road construction,” and recommended that the state allow such systems moving forward.

In light of TTI’s findings and recommendations, C.S.S.B. 1919 gives the Texas Transportation Commission the authority to establish a variable speed limit pilot program.

The committee substitute addresses concerns that various offices raised in our staff briefing. Specifically, the substitute calls upon TxDOT to re-implement the variable speed limit pilot program so that the legislature can review more thorough information before deciding if the program should become permanent next session. The substitute language matches what was passed last session in H.B. 2204, except that instead of limiting the pilot to up to three sites, C.S.S.B. 1919 limits the pilot to up to 10 sites.

C.S.S.B. 1919 amends current law relating to the establishment of a variable speed limit pilot program by the Texas Transportation Commission.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

Rulemaking authority is expressly granted to the Texas Transportation Commission in SECTION 2 of this bill.

SECTION BY SECTION ANALYSIS

SECTION 1. DEFINITIONS. Defines “commission” and “department.”

SECTION 2. VARIABLE SPEED LIMIT PILOT PROGRAM. (a) Requires the Texas Transportation Commission (commission) to by rule establish and requires the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to implement a variable speed limit pilot program to study the effectiveness of temporarily lowering prima facie speed limits to address inclement weather, congestion, road construction, or any other condition that affects the safe and orderly movement of traffic on a roadway. Authorizes notice of a speed limit established under the pilot

program to be displayed using a stationary or portable changeable message sign, as defined by Section 544.013 (Changeable Message Sign System), Transportation Code.

(b) Requires the commission to select up to 10 locations to test the pilot program.

(c) Requires the commission to inform the Department of Public Safety of the State of Texas and any affected local law enforcement agency about the pilot program and the locations that are being used to test the pilot program.

(d) Provides that a speed limit that is established under the pilot program:

(1) must be based on an engineering and traffic investigation;

(2) may be effective for all or a designated portion of the highway and may be effective for any period of the day or night, as TxDOT determines necessary; and

(3) is effective only when the speed limit is posted and only if a sign notifying motorists of the change in speed limit is posted not less than 500 feet but not more than 1,000 feet before the point at which the speed limit begins.

SECTION 3. REPORT. Requires the commission, not later than December 31, 2016, to submit a report to the legislature that includes information about the pilot program, the results of the pilot program, and any recommendations for statutory changes based on the results of the pilot program.

SECTION 4. EXPIRATION. Provides that this Act expires February 1, 2017.

SECTION 5. EFFECTIVE DATE. Effective date: upon passage or September 1, 2015.