

Vehicle Noise Cameras

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Legislative Brief

Overview

A bill file has been requested to create Utah's first statutory framework authorizing noise-triggered cameras, which would automate a vehicle-noise standard that today can be enforced only by an officer on scene with a decibel meter. The core tradeoff is real enforcement capacity against a familiar Utah objection: the state banned photo traffic enforcement in 1996 and has repeatedly declined to authorize automated enforcement since. A durable bill must answer due-process and accuracy concerns up front. The most defensible path, drawn from California's enacted law, is to build in mandatory human review, a certified calibration standard, and strict data limits from the start. Utah should also consider a study-or-pilot-first structure rather than an immediate statewide grant of authority.

How Noise Cameras Work

A noise camera pairs a calibrated sound-level meter with an automated license-plate reader. When a passing vehicle exceeds a set decibel threshold, the system records the sound level, timestamps it, identifies the source of the noise, and photographs the plate, producing an evidence package that can become a citation mailed to the registered owner. The core idea is to automate a measurement that officers can otherwise perform only one vehicle at a time, by hand, on scene. In New York City's program, the system uses an array of microphones plus a panoramic camera and a plate reader: when the microphones detect that a threshold is exceeded, the camera pinpoints the source, the reader identifies the vehicle, and department staff issue the summons (NYC DEP, 2026, p. 1).

The distinction that matters for policy is the **trigger**. Speed and red-light cameras trigger on a measurable driving event; a noise camera triggers on sound, which is harder to attribute cleanly because it travels, overlaps between vehicles, and can come from a car that merely needs a muffler repair. Two design features recur in the statutes that have codified this technology, and both matter for a Utah framework. The first is **certified accuracy**: California requires devices to meet the Class 1 accuracy standard in IEC 61672:2013, the international calibration standard for precision sound meters (Cal. Veh. Code § 27150.4(e) (5), 2022). The second is **human review**: the same statute requires that an officer be able to manually review the evidence and confirm a violation before any action (Cal. Veh. Code § 27150.4(e)(4), 2022).

A **decibel** (dBA, A-weighted to approximate human hearing) is a logarithmic measure of sound intensity. Enforcement thresholds are set by the underlying noise limit rather than the camera: California's statutory limits are 95 dBA for cars and 80 dBA for motorcycles built after 1985 (Cal. Veh. Code § 27150.4, 2022). In Salt Lake County, Health Regulation #21 sets a limit of 80 dBA for standard vehicles traveling 40 mph or less, measured at 25 feet (Salt Lake County Health Department, 2021, § 13).

Utah Enforcement Gap

Chronic vehicle noise is both a livability issue and a documented public-health one. New York City's environmental agency states that loud engine and muffler noise can cause harmful public-health impacts including sleep deprivation and hearing loss (NYC DEP, 2026, p. 1). In Utah, the demand is concrete: along a single Salt Lake City corridor, police logged 113 noise complaints in about eighteen months, and a county health scientist measuring on a Friday night counted 15 to 20 violations in 30 minutes against the county standard of above 80 dBA under 40 mph (Dean & Headrick, 2021; Salt Lake County Health Department, 2021, § 13).

The enforcement gap is the core problem. Officers can cite noise only when present with a meter, and a Salt Lake City deputy chief acknowledged that noise ranks below higher-priority calls amid staffing shortfalls (Dean & Headrick, 2021). After the complaints drew attention, the department reported buying decibel meters for patrol officers and planning citations, an illustration that Utah's demonstrated response to date has been manual rather than automated (Dean & Headrick, 2021). That is precisely the gap automated detection is designed to close.

Utah's Legal & Political Landscape

Utah has **no statutory framework authorizing noise-triggered cameras**, and none are known to be deployed in the state. Any enabling authority would be created new rather than layered onto an existing regime, and two features of Utah law shape that starting point.

First, the existing noise standard is qualitative, not numeric. Utah Code § 41-6a-1626 (2025) requires that a vehicle be operated to prevent excessive or unusual noise, be equipped with a functioning muffler, and carry no cut-out or bypass device. The statute sets no decibel figure and says nothing about how a violation is detected, so an automated system would need a numeric threshold added or cross-referenced to have something objective to measure against.

Second, Utah has consistently been cautious on automated enforcement. Photo-based traffic enforcement ("PhotoCop") was banned by the Legislature in 1996, and that ban still stands. The Legislature has considered automated enforcement several times since without enacting it: SB 105 (2023) proposed a UDOT speed-camera pilot for school and construction zones, and HB 201 (2024, Rep. Brett Garner) proposed a Speed Safety Camera Pilot Program allowing speed cameras without an officer present, but HB 201 did not pass, its last action being filed in the "House file for bills not passed" on March 1, 2024 (Utah HB 201, 2024; St. George News, 2024). The prior legislative instinct on vehicle noise specifically favored inspection over cameras: HB 95 (2023) would have checked mufflers at emissions inspection but died in the House (Winslow, 2023; Utah HB 95, 2023). The pattern is a Legislature willing to study automated enforcement but not yet to authorize it.

Key Provisions

Because Utah would be writing on a blank slate, the provisions below are the design choices most likely to determine whether a bill works and whether it survives. California's enacted statute (Cal. Veh. Code § 27150.4) offers tested language for each, mapped onto the three components in the requested bill file.

- **A numeric trigger.** Section 41-6a-1626's qualitative "excessive or unusual noise" standard gives a camera nothing objective to measure. A bill will need to add or cross-reference a decibel figure; Salt Lake County's 80 dBA at 40 mph is a defensible in-state anchor (Salt Lake County Health Department, 2021, § 13).
- **Certified accuracy.** California requires devices to meet the Class 1 accuracy standard in IEC 61672:2013 (Cal. Veh. Code § 27150.4(e)(5), 2022).
- **Human review.** California requires that the system permit an officer to manually review the evidence and confirm a violation before action (Cal. Veh. Code § 27150.4(e)(4), 2022). This directly answers the due-process objection tied to Utah's PhotoCop history.
- **Data limits.** California deletes highway recordings within five days, makes identifying information confidential and usable only for the program, and auto-deletes any evidence not tied to a violation (Cal. Veh. Code § 27150.4(c)–(d) & (e)(3), 2022).
- **Delegation.** Because § 41-6a-1626 is a statewide Traffic Code provision, a bill must specify how enforcement authority is delegated to municipalities and how local programs relate to the state standard.
- **Sunset or review.** A defined sunset with a report back to the Legislature mirrors California's evaluate-then-authorize sequence and fits Utah's demonstrated preference for studying automated enforcement before adopting it.

Anticipated Stakeholder Positions

No formal testimony exists yet, because no bill has been introduced. The positions below are *anticipated* by analogy to the documented record on related Utah measures and comparable programs elsewhere, and should be replaced with actual statements once a bill is public.

- **Likely support.** Residents and neighborhood groups along high-noise corridors (the documented complaint base in Salt Lake City), and public-health-oriented officials, given the sleep and hearing-loss harms agencies attribute to chronic vehicle noise (Dean & Headrick, 2021; NYC DEP, 2026, p. 1). Some law-enforcement leaders may support it as a way to enforce a standard they currently lack the staffing to address.
- **Likely opposition.** Automated-enforcement skeptics who recall the 1996 PhotoCop ban and raise due-process concerns about confronting an automated accuser and identifying the driver from a plate (Winslow, 2023). Vehicle-enthusiast communities and some privacy advocates may object to camera surveillance and to false positives on vehicles that merely need repair.
- **Watching / neutral.** State agencies that would implement or calibrate a program, county health departments (Salt Lake County's Regulation #21 was itself under amendment in late 2025), and legislators inclined to condition support on a pilot-first structure.

Fiscal

No fiscal note exists yet. For scale, a mature program offers a reference point: New York City's 2025 program reported roughly \$492,565 in personnel costs and \$109,092 in vendor calibration and service costs for twelve cameras, against \$308,229 actually collected in penalties that year (NYC DEP, 2026). The implication for Utah is that a noise-camera program is not self-evidently revenue-positive, at least early on, and staffing for human review is a real recurring cost. A Utah fiscal note would need to address device procurement, calibration, review staffing, and signage.

Policy

Enforcement capacity vs. the automated-enforcement objection

Automation solves the staffing problem that manual enforcement has repeatedly run into (Dean & Headrick, 2021). But it revives the same objection that produced the 1996 PhotoCop ban. The provisions that expand capacity are exactly the ones critics distrust, so a bill's durability depends on pairing capacity with visible safeguards rather than choosing between them.

Accuracy vs. speed of deployment

A fully automated citation is fast but invites false-positive and misattribution challenges; California's own evaluation was tasked with measuring how often devices flagged non-muffler sounds and how often an officer could not identify the source (Cal. Veh. Code § 27150.4(b)(1)(B)–(C), 2022). Requiring human review and certified calibration reduces error but adds cost and slows processing. Where a bill sets that dial is a genuine policy choice.

Immediate authority vs. study-first

A statewide grant of enforcement authority delivers results sooner; a study or limited pilot with a legislative report, the path California took, lowers risk and builds a record but defers impact (California Highway Patrol, 2025). The choice turns on how much certainty the Legislature wants before authorizing citations, and Utah's track record suggests it will want a good deal.

Related Legislation & What to Watch

- **Utah HB 201 (2024), Traffic Enforcement Amendments (did not pass).** Would have created a Speed Safety Camera Pilot Program for school and construction zones; its failure is the most recent signal of Utah's caution on automated enforcement.
- **Utah SB 105 (2023).** An earlier UDOT speed-camera pilot proposal, also not enacted; useful as evidence of repeated legislative interest without adoption.
- **Utah HB 95 (2023), Noise Pollution Amendments.** The prior, inspection-based approach to vehicle noise; its failure signals both appetite for the issue and caution about the mechanism.
- **California Highway Patrol SB 1079 report (2025).** A government evaluation of device accuracy and safeguards; the most rigorous external record to track before Utah authorizes citations.
- **Salt Lake County Health Regulation #21.** Amendments were proposed in October 2025; changes to the underlying local standard would affect any numeric trigger a bill references.
- **The bill draft itself.** Watch whether it adopts a study/pilot-with-sunset structure or a permanent statewide grant, and whether it requires human review before citations issue.

Sources & Further Readings

Citations:

Utah Code § 41-6a-1626 (2025). Mufflers – Prevention of noise, smoke, and fumes. Utah State Legislature. <https://le.utah.gov/xcode/Title41/Chapter6a/41-6a-S1626.html>

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New York City Department of Environmental Protection (2026). 2025 annual report for the Noise Camera Enforcement Program. <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/dep/downloads/pdf/air/noise/2025-annual-report-noise-camera-enforcement-program.pdf>

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Winslow, B. (2023, January 6). Utah lawmakers may crack down on noisy tailpipes and bring back 'PhotoCop'. FOX 13 News Utah. <https://www.fox13now.com/news/local-news/utah-lawmakers-may-crack-down-on-noisy-tailpipes-and-bring-back-photocop>

St. George News (2024, February 10). Bill geared toward using automation to slow Utah drivers in school, construction zones gets 2nd chance. <https://www.stgeorgeutah.com/>

Note on sources: Load-bearing claims rely on primary and official sources (statutes, agency reports, and government regulations). Program figures are drawn from the New York City DEP annual report and the California Highway Patrol evaluation; vendor marketing and syndicated consumer coverage reviewed in research were excluded in favor of primary sources for the same facts.