



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Shelley B. Mayer

The Examiner News: Harckham Bill Would Require Drivers to Accompany Automated Trucks

MARTIN WILBUR January 9, 2024



State Sen. Peter Harckham (D-Lewisboro) was joined by members of the Teamsters last week calling for passage of legislation that would mandate a driver accompany automated trucks to protect public safety and preserve jobs.

Harckham has introduced a bill that would require rigs that can be operated without a driver and weigh at least 10,000 pounds to have a licensed operator in the cab. Typically, the trucks that would be affected are the large tractor-trailers that travel mainly on interstates and

other large highways that transport materials and goods to warehouses.

He said the technology has not yet progressed to the point where driverless vehicles can be reliably operated without glitches that can pose a major safety threat to other motorists, which would mainly be passenger vehicles. It would also protect the jobs of more than 58,000 drivers of heavy trucks and tractor-trailers currently living in the state.

“The Vehicle and Traffic Law in New York presently has no requirement that the heaviest vehicles, such as semi-trucks or city buses, have a human being in the cab capable of taking control of the vehicle in case of an emergency,” Harckham said. “So without stifling the progress of the transportation and freight industries, this bill seeks to remedy those two threats, to jobs, to public safety and still while accommodating technological innovations.”

Vehicles that would not be affected are smaller delivery trucks that would drop off products in local stores and businesses.

The looming danger posed by technological failure remains high even as advances are made, Harckham said. In San Francisco, a taxi company using autonomous vehicles took all of its cars off the road because of software glitches that failed to recognize people, animals and emergency sirens, he said.

“We know that progress is coming, but the technology is not there,” Harckham said. “The potential for injury and death grows exponentially in such instances where the vehicle that has the enormity, the great mass, inertia and force of a commercial semitrailer truck compared to a passenger vehicle. So we’re talking about a magnitude of risk on the size.”

The senator gathered with leadership and rank-and-file members of Teamsters Local 456 in Elmsford last Friday morning, which gave its full-throated support for Harckham’s legislation. One out of every 27 jobs in the state are in the trucking industry, according to

Harckham and the union.

Louis Picani, president and principal officer of Teamsters Local 456, said the public should support the bill because driverless trucks can also be victimized by hackers.

“This bill will also protect every person traveling in and out of the state of New York – pedestrians, tourists – as these unmanned trucks can be literal weapons,” Picani said.

“Cybercrimes happen every day. Banks, casinos, municipalities, governments all susceptible to the devastating ransomware attacks. Autonomous trucks are no different than any of these scenarios.”

Also supporting Harckham’s bill is state Sen. Shelley Mayer (D-Yonkers). Last week Mayer’s chief of staff, Rachel Estroff added that its essential that the state’s law and policies should anticipate the effects of new technology and other challenges and must be regulated to help ensure public safety.

Harckham mentioned that while widespread use of driverless vehicles and trucks might still be several years away, it’s better for the state to be ahead of the curve than to play catchup.

“We need to set the foundation now because we know how rapidly technology advances,” he said. “There are states in this country where on a limited basis autonomous trucks are being used. We we want to get out ahead of this in New York State.”