

Low-Speed Vehicles

By: Heather Poole, Principal Analyst
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Issue

This report provides an overview of (1) low-speed vehicles and federal standards for them, (2) current Connecticut law and previous legislation pertaining to low-speed vehicles, and (3) other states' low-speed vehicle laws. This report updates OLR Reports [2008-R-0432](#) and [2008-R-0479](#).

Summary

“Low-speed vehicle” (LSV) is a federally approved vehicle classification that was established in 1998 as small, lightweight vehicles with low maximum speeds were growing in popularity. (The term “neighborhood electric vehicle” (NEV) is often used interchangeably with LSV, although NEVs are technically a subset of LSVs.) LSVs are generally four-wheeled vehicles that can go at least 20 mph but do not go faster than 25 mph, and those manufactured for sale in the United States must meet federal safety standards.

Connecticut does not currently authorize the use of LSVs. Although state law allows municipalities to permit the use of golf carts on local roads, it is unclear whether the law would allow them to also permit LSVs. We identified at least 13 LSV bills introduced since 2005, but most did not make it out of committee and only two passed one chamber (the Senate). The Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) and Department of Transportation (DOT) have raised concerns about these proposals in the past, while LSV manufacturers and retailers and environmental groups have advocated for their passage.

At least 47 states have laws generally authorizing or allowing local governments to authorize LSV operation; it appears that Arkansas and Wyoming, in addition to Connecticut, are the only three

states that do not have laws allowing LSV operation. Most states require that LSVs meet federal safety standards and equipment requirements, and all of the states with LSV laws impose various conditions on their operation. Examples of these conditions include (1) restricting LSV use to low speed limit roads (e.g., 35 mph); (2) requiring that LSVs be registered and insured; and (3) allowing local governments to further restrict LSV use.

Federal Standards

On June 17, 1988, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) published a final rule establishing the new vehicle class of low-speed vehicles and a new, separate federal motor vehicle safety standard (FMVSS) for them. (FMVSS are minimum vehicle safety standards that all motor vehicles manufactured for sale in the United States must meet.)

NHTSA initially adopted this standard in response to growing public interest in using golf carts or similar vehicles to make short, local trips for shopping and recreational purposes (primarily within retirement or other planned, self-contained communities) and the recently enacted state and local laws allowing this use of these vehicles with top speeds of up to 25 mph. Prior to the adoption of federal LSV regulations, golf carts and similar types of vehicles that could exceed 20 mph were considered motor vehicles for FMVSS purposes and had to meet the safety standards for passenger cars. However, this was not feasible for these vehicles due to their size and structure. The regulations resolved this conflict between state laws allowing the use of these vehicles and federal standards that would restrict their manufacture and sale ([Docket No. NHTSA 98-3949](#)).

The definition of LSV and the LSV safety standard have been amended several times since the final rule's initial adoption. Current regulations define a low-speed vehicle as a four-wheeled motor vehicle that has a (1) speed attainable in one mile of more than 20 mph but not more than 25 mph on a paved, level surface and (2) gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) of less than 3,000 pounds ([49 C.F.R. § 571.3](#)). LSVs must satisfy certain requirements under specified testing conditions and be equipped with the following:

1. headlights, turn signals, tail lights, and brake lights;
2. reflex reflectors;
3. an exterior mirror on the driver's side and either an exterior mirror on the passenger's side or an interior mirror (in addition to meeting other specified rear visibility requirements);
4. a parking brake;
5. a windshield meeting federal standards on glazing materials;

6. a vehicle identification number (VIN) meeting federal requirements;
7. a seatbelt assembly meeting federal requirements; and
8. a pedestrian alert sound (i.e., noise that certain electric and hybrid vehicles must make at speeds less than 18.6 mph that pedestrians can hear over background noises) ([49 C.F.R. § 571.500](#)).

Connecticut Law and LSVs

While Connecticut statutes are silent on LSVs, the Department of Motor Vehicles does not [register](#) LSVs. State law prohibits driving unregistered motor vehicles on public roads, including vehicles that are ineligible for registration because they lack necessary equipment or are unsuitable for road use, unless another statute specifically authorizes their use ([CGS § 14-12\(a\)](#)).

State law allows local traffic authorities (LTAs) to permit the use of golf carts on roads under their jurisdictions, subject to certain conditions (e.g., operation is restricted to low-speed roads) ([CGS § 14-300g](#)). However, it is unclear whether an LTA could authorize the use of low-speed vehicles on local roads under this statute. For more information on the use of golf carts on local roads, see OLR Report [2020-R-0259](#).

Previous Legislation

We identified 13 bills introduced since 2005 on LSVs or NEVs, as shown in Table 1. While all these bills received a public hearing, most did not make it out of committee. Four of the bills were voted out of committee (in some cases, more than one), and two of those passed the Senate but died on the House calendar.

Both DMV (see, for example, [2013 HB 6029 testimony](#)) and DOT (see [2006 SB 320 JF Report](#)) have historically raised concerns about LSV legislation, specifically citing speed differential between LSVs and the rest of traffic and, for DMV, costs to the agency to register the vehicles. However, DMV supported consideration of [2005 SB 1288](#), citing nationwide popularity of the vehicles, their suitability for certain uses, and the low expected cost of registering them (see the bill's [JF Report](#)).

Proponents of LSV legislation have generally been environmental advocacy groups (e.g., [Environment Northeast](#)) and LSV manufacturers and retailers. Both have highlighted the vehicles' environmental benefits and cost savings to consumers, among other benefits.

Table 1: Legislation on LSVs Since 2005

Year	Bill #	Committee of Origin	Summary	Result
2005	HB 6719	Transportation	Established an LSV task force	Public hearing held, no further action
2005	SB 1288	Transportation	Authorized and regulated NEV operation, established registration requirements	Passed by Senate, House took no action
2006	SB 320	Transportation	Authorized and regulated NEV operation, established registration requirements	Passed by Senate, House took no action
2009	Proposed SB 699 , SB 739 , HB 5662 , HB 6078	Transportation	Proposed the authorization of LSV and NEV use and registration	Public hearings held, no further action
2010	HB 5465 (§§ 15 & 16)	Energy	Authorized operation of NEVs in limited circumstances	Reported favorably by the Energy, Higher Education, and Labor committees; House took no action
2011	Proposed HB 6191	Transportation	Proposed the authorization of NEV use and registration	Public hearing held, no further action
2013	Proposed HB 6029	Transportation	Proposed the authorization of NEV use and registration	Public hearing held, no further action
2014	SB 108	Energy	Authorized and regulated LSV operation, established registration requirements	Reported favorably by Energy and Transportation committees, Senate took no action
2017	Proposed SB 252	Transportation	Proposed the authorization of NEV use and registration	Public hearing held, no further action
2018	SB 290	Transportation	Authorized and regulated NEV operation, established registration requirements	Public hearing held, provision was eliminated when committee voted on the bill

Other States' Laws

We identified 47 states that authorize LSV operation. We did not find any LSV laws for Arkansas and Wyoming. Thus, it appears that only three states, including Connecticut, have not enacted laws authorizing the use of LSVs. Most of the laws provide general authorization for LSV use, but at least three instead explicitly authorize local governments to pass ordinances allowing LSV operation on roads under their jurisdictions. Of those states providing general authorization, at least 27 explicitly authorize local governments to further restrict LSV operation or, in some cases, expand where LSVs may be used.

The provisions in state LSV laws are generally similar. Most states require LSVs to meet federal safety standards and equipment requirements and be registered, titled, and insured before they may be driven on public roads. States also place various restrictions on LSV operation, including (1) limiting LSV use to roads with low speed limits (typically, no more than 30 or 35 mph), except that they may cross roads with higher speed limits; (2) explicitly prohibiting their use on limited-access highways; (3) requiring LSV drivers to hold a driver’s license; and (4) subjecting LSVs to the same traffic laws applicable to other motor vehicles. Some states allow only licensed car dealers to sell LSVs.

A few states also require certain information to be affixed to LSVs to notify LSV drivers and other drivers about LSV restrictions and operational limitations. Some states require that LSVs display a “slow-moving vehicle” or a “25-mph vehicle” decal on the back of the vehicle (e.g., [New Jersey](#) and [Pennsylvania](#)). Hawaii requires a notice of operational restrictions to be permanently attached to an LSV in view of the driver ([Ha. Rev. Stat. § 291C-134](#)).

Table 2 lists the 47 states we identified with LSV laws and indicates, for each state, (1) whether LSV use is authorized generally or is a local option and (2) any provisions we found giving local governments authority to regulate or restrict LSVs within their jurisdictions. While we use the term LSV in the table, some of the laws apply to NEVs or low-speed electric vehicles and the scope of the vehicles covered by the law may vary between states. More information on state-specific restrictions is available from the sources linked in the table.

Table 2: States Allowing Low-Speed Vehicles

State	Authorization	Local Authority to Regulate or Prohibit	Source(s)
Alabama	Local option	State law allows certain municipalities and local governments to authorize the use of LSVs	Ala. Code § 11-73-2, § 40-12-242.2
Alaska	General	Municipalities may further restrict LSV operation	U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) ; Alaska Stat. § 28.35.261
Arizona	General		U.S. DOE
California	General	Local authorities may restrict or prohibit LSV operation on any road in their jurisdiction when the agency deems it to be in the best interest of public safety	U.S. DOE ; Cal Veh. Code § 21266
Colorado	General	Local governments may further regulate the use of LSVs	U.S. DOE ; Colo. Rev. Stat. § 42-4-111(aa)
Delaware	General		U.S. DOE

Table 2 (continued)

State	Authorization	Local Authority to Regulate or Prohibit	Source(s)
Florida	General	Municipalities may prohibit LSV operation on any road where it determines the prohibition is necessary for public safety	U.S. DOE; Fla. Stat. § 316.2122(3)
Georgia	General		Ga. Code Ann. § 40-6-361
Hawaii	General		U.S. DOE
Idaho	General		U.S. DOE
Illinois	General	Local governments may (1) restrict LSV access on streets if they determine public safety may be jeopardized and (2) allow LSV operation on streets or roads with speeds higher than the state threshold	U.S. DOE; 625 ILCS 5/11-1426.2
Indiana	General		U.S. DOE
Iowa	General		U.S. DOE
Kansas	General		U.S. DOE
Kentucky	General		U.S. DOE
Louisiana	General	Municipalities may prohibit LSV operation on any road in their jurisdiction where they determine the prohibition is necessary for public safety	U.S. DOE; La. Stat. Ann. § 32:300.1
Maine	General	Municipality may prohibit LSV operation on roads in its jurisdiction if it determines it is necessary for public safety	U.S. DOE
Maryland	General	Local authorities may prohibit LSV operation on streets in their jurisdictions	U.S. DOE; Md. Code Regs. § 11.15.32.10
Massachusetts	General	Municipality may prohibit LSV operation on roads in its jurisdiction where it determines that using an LSV would present an unreasonable risk of injury or death to LSV occupants	Mass. Gen. Law ch. 90 § 1F
Michigan	General		Mich. Comp. Laws §§ 257.660 & 257.25b
Minnesota	General	Local authorities may prohibit or further restrict LSV operation on streets or highways in their jurisdiction	U.S. DOE
Mississippi	Local option	Authority to permit LSVs lies with local government	U.S. DOE

Table 2 (continued)

State	Authorization	Local Authority to Regulate or Prohibit	Source(s)
Missouri	General	Local governments may adopt more stringent regulations if they determine it necessary for public safety	U.S. DOE ; Mo. Rev. Stat. § 304.029
Montana	General		U.S. DOE
Nebraska	General	Local governments may adopt more stringent regulations if they determine it necessary for public safety	U.S. DOE ; Neb. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 60-6,380
Nevada	General		U.S. DOE
New Hampshire	General		U.S. DOE
New Jersey	General	Local governments may (1) prohibit LSV use on roads in their jurisdiction where it would constitute a hazard and (2) allow LSV operation on streets or roads with speeds higher than the state threshold	U.S. DOE ; N.J. Stat. Ann. § 39:4-31.1
New Mexico	General	Local authorities may prohibit LSVs on any road in their jurisdiction if they determine it necessary for public safety	U.S. DOE
New York	General		U.S. DOE
North Carolina	General		N.C. Gen. Stat. § 20-121.1
North Dakota	General		U.S. DOE
Ohio	General	Local authority may adopt more stringent requirements for LSV operation	Ohio Rev. Code § 4511.214
Oklahoma	General	Cities may further restrict LSV operation on city-owned streets to ensure public safety	U.S. DOE ; Okla. Stat. tit. 47, § 11-805.1
Oregon	General	Local governments may allow LSV operation on streets or roads with speeds higher than the state threshold	U.S. DOE ; Or. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 811.512
Pennsylvania	General	Local authorities may prohibit LSV use on roads where they determine it would constitute a hazard	75 PA Stat. §§ 3592 & 3593
Rhode Island	General	Municipalities may prohibit LSV use on roads where they determine such use is unsafe for LSV occupants	2023 H 5457

Table 2 (continued)

State	Authorization	Local Authority to Regulate or Prohibit	Source(s)
South Carolina	General	Local governments may (1) adopt more stringent local ordinances on LSV operation and (2) prohibit operation on roads where they determine it is necessary for safety	U.S. DOE ; S.C. Code § 56-2-100
South Dakota	General	Local governments may adopt more stringent local ordinances on LSV operation	S.D. Codified Laws §§ 32-3-71 & 32-25-27
Tennessee	General	Local governments may prohibit LSV operation on any road in their jurisdiction if they determine it is necessary for safety	U.S. DOE ; Tenn. Code § 55-8-191
Texas	General	Local governments may prohibit LSVs on any road under its jurisdiction if they determine it necessary for public safety	U.S. DOE
Utah	General	A highway authority may prohibit or restrict LSVs on roads in its jurisdiction if it determines the restriction is necessary for public safety	U.S. DOE ; Utah Code § 41-6a-1508
Vermont	General	Municipalities may prohibit LSVs from using or crossing certain roads if they deem it necessary for public safety	U.S. DOE ; 23 V.S.A. § 1043
Virginia	General	Local governing body may prohibit LSV use on its roads in the interest of safety	U.S. DOE
Washington	General	Local authorities may regulate LSV operation on streets and highways in their jurisdiction, with certain exceptions (e.g., state highways with a speed limit of 25 mph or less)	U.S. DOE ; Wash. Rev. Code § 46.61.725
West Virginia	General		U.S. DOE
Wisconsin	Local option	Authority to permit LSVs lies with local government	U.S. DOE

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