

PRO/CON: Is the idea of driverless cars gaining popularity?

By Tribune News Service, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.13.16

Word Count **1,141**



A self-driving Ford Fusion hybrid car is test driven in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on August 18, 2016. AP Photo/Jared Wickerham

PRO: Driverless cars could allow Americans to live where they want, without worrying about their commute to work

Technological advances are having a major effect on the way people live their lives. The changes are coming faster than at any time in human history.

Just 30 years ago, few could imagine having one's very own pocket-sized supercomputer — one that allows you to do virtually anything, from finding a date to buying a house. Yet today's smartphone is here and used by nearly everyone.

Now, the driverless car is another society-shifting invention that may become part of everyday life in the not-so-distant future.

Car Companies And State Governments Are Gearing Up

Carmakers like Volkswagen and General Motors say they will begin selling driverless cars in just three or four years.

State governments have already started preparing for the new technology's arrival.

California, Florida, Michigan and Nevada have recently passed laws governing their use. More than a dozen other states are considering similar legislation.

Many industry experts predict driverless cars will reduce private car ownership.

No longer will people be forced to spend thousands of dollars on a new car. Instead, when they need to get somewhere they will open an app on a computer or smartphone and call for a driverless taxi.

Suburban Life Is Preferred

Driverless cars may radically change the way people travel to and from work. Most likely they will also alter where and how people live.

In recent years, more and more people in the U.S. have been moving to big cities. However, groups have been sending out surveys which show that people of all ages still prefer to live in suburbs, because they are more affordable, convenient and spacious.

One 2015 poll showed that as many as two-thirds of young people would choose suburban living over life in the city.

If Americans still prefer the suburbs over city centers, why are so many choosing to live in cities?

Cities Hold The Best Jobs

There are a number of reasons for the shift from suburbs to cities. One of the most important is that many of the most desirable new jobs are in the tech industry, and many tech companies are located in big cities.

People who want to work in tech often need to be close to the action.

However, this does not mean that cities typically offer a better quality of life. In most cases, they do not.

Taxes are highest in some of the country's major cities, such as Chicago, New York, San Francisco and Seattle. Crime and pollution remain significantly worse in cities as well.

Commuting Will Become Easy

Driverless cars could completely change the way Americans think about where they live. Traveling from suburb to city center will become much less tiring, as people will no longer have to do the driving themselves. Because of that, people will feel less need to live where they work. They will no longer be forced to pay the high rents, taxes and fees common in big cities in order to work comfortably in those places.

With driverless cars, driving to work will be a breeze. Instead of being an exhausting trek, it will feel more like sitting at home on the couch watching a favorite television show.

If that is what the future looks like, most of us will not mind the extra travel time.

Justin Haskins is the executive editor of Heartland Institute, a conservative and libertarian public policy think tank.

CON: Driverless cars will bring about major safety and legal issues

A nationwide network of millions of self-driving cars whisking suburban commuters to work is a pleasant vision. However, getting to that point is far from simple.

Self-driving cars have been in development for years. Their backers claim the vehicles will be ready to take over the car market in the near future.

Having millions use these vehicles will improve highway safety, they claim. Driverless cars will make even the far suburbs more convenient places to live, they say.

However, before those suburban dwellers can order such cars, some gigantic problems must be overcome.

The Technology Is Not Safe

First, the technology used in those cars creates serious safety problems. Huge improvements must be made before they can safely handle streets.

Driverless cars rely primarily on pre-programmed information about routes. If something on the road changes, they are lost. For example, they would not obey a short-term stop sign. They also have problems figuring out when objects such as bits of paper garbage are harmless, so they can change course abruptly for no reason.

The vehicles simply cannot deal with the unexpected adventures that fill everyday life. Until the cars can self-drive at all times, humans are going to have to be ready to take over at a moment's notice.

Human Error Causes Problems

Meanwhile, Google's self-driving car has already run into another perplexing safety problem: human drivers.

Recently, one of Google's self-driving cars came to a crosswalk and did what it was supposed to do: It slowed down to allow someone on foot to cross the street. However, the human "safety driver" panicked and hit the brakes. No one was hurt, but Google's car was hit from behind by another car.

Driverless cars cannot work properly unless detailed road maps have been loaded into the computers that guide them. Currently, the maps for Google's self-driving cars have only been designed to handle a few thousand miles of road. Developing a nationwide self-driving car system would require countless amounts of effort and money. Car companies would need to maintain and update information on millions of miles of roads.

Regulation Roadblocks

The development of driverless vehicles would also mean more state and federal regulation. There would be all sorts of new rules covering how, when and where driverless cars can be used. Most likely, all those new rules would significantly slow the spread of driverless cars.

The use of driverless cars would also raise issues of legal responsibility. For example, who should be held responsible in the event of a crash — the passenger, the carmaker or the designer of the computer system? Such complicated legal issues could take years and many lawyers to sort out.

Paying The Price

Totally self-driving cars will likely not be cheap, either. One report says making a car completely self-driving would add some \$10,000 to its price.

There is also the problem of getting people to accept them. Cars are not just transportation — they also reflect our personalities and tastes.

Imagine someone who loves driving, who enjoys zooming down the highway in a sleek sports car. It will be hard to get them to accept simply being a passenger in a not-very-exciting computer-controlled vehicle.

Whitt Flora is an independent journalist who covered the White House for the Columbus Dispatch and was chief congressional correspondent for Aviation Week & Space Technology magazine.