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The car-free city is a myth, but the driverless country is coming

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One of history's greatest inventions, the mass-produced automobile, brought mobility to the masses, provided access to better housing and low-cost consumer goods, and enabled both the civil rights and women's rights movements.

We're solving problems with pollution and auto safety without reducing that mobility. In the United States since 1970, there has been a 180 per cent growth in driving, yet total highway air pollution is down 85 per cent while fatality rates per 1.6 billion kilometres of driving have declined 78 per cent.

Renewed calls for "car-free cities" ignore the great benefits of automobility.

As dozens of cities learnt when they closed downtown streets in the 1960s through to the 1980s, with few exceptions car-free streets were economically dead streets.

Instead of car-free cities, we are on the threshold of another mobility revolution that will make cars more common than ever: the self-driving car. Among other things, self-driving cars will change where we live and almost replace public transit systems.

In 2013, America's transit systems spent more than \$US60 billion carrying fewer than 95 billion passenger kilometres, for an average cost of \$US1.03 per passenger 1.6 kilometre.

By comparison, Barclays estimates that shared, self-driving cars will cost only 29¢ per 1.6 kilometre. Since cars are also faster and more convenient than transit, transit will disappear except in places that are too dense to be served by automobiles, which, in the US, mainly means New York City.

Self-driving cars will change the way we think about distance. If people can work, watch movies or play video games with their children on their morning commutes, they will be willing to live

further from work than they do today. This means urban areas will become even more spread out than at present.

No one can predict all the changes self-driving cars will bring about. However, we know self-driving cars use the same basic infrastructure as human-driven cars, so states and cities need to fill potholes and maintain bridges. We have a pretty good idea that public transit will at least shrink, so transit agencies should focus on low-cost, flexible bus services and not build expensive and pointless rail lines.

We know that efforts to control so-called "sprawl" have backfired by making housing unaffordable, while self-driving cars will allow more people to live in a single-family home with a backyard, if they prefer.

City planners should reduce land use regulation and focus on ensuring that people pay for the services they use wherever they choose to live.

The Obama administration wants to spend several billion dollars on pilot "smart-road" projects; that is, electronic infrastructure that can help guide self-driving cars. This is a foolish plan as whatever is installed will be obsolete long before the government can build it into all of the nation's 6.4 million kilometres of roads.

Google, Ford, Volkswagen, Volvo and most other companies designing self-driving cars don't believe such infrastructure is needed. Instead of relying on smart roads, their cars are self-contained, using precise maps showing the location of every highway stripe and street sign.

A company called HERE has precisely mapped about two-thirds of the nation's paved roads and streets, updating the maps daily.

Several manufacturers have promised to have self-driving cars for sale by 2020. Once the basic software is available, it may be possible to upgrade many recent cars to be self-drivable for \$US1000 (\$1300) or less, which means self-driving cars will dominate the roads sooner than most people think.

When self-driving cars take the road, will you own your car or car-share? Will you live in an urban apartment or on an exurban hobby farm? Will you shop and work online while your self-driving car takes you to another city? No one knows the answers to these questions, so the best that states and cities can do is to keep options open and not commit themselves to expensive technologies, whether rail transit or smart roads, that are likely to soon be obsolete.

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