# Brave New World: Self-Driving Cars Will Change How, Where People Live

*Land Use, Infrastructure Policy Must Adapt to Technology*

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September 30, 2014

More than half a century has passed since the US interstate highway system was established, revolutionizing transportation in the country. Today, we are on the brink of a technological shock to the system unparalleled since then, in the form of autonomous vehicles, or self-driving cars.

A new study from the Cato Institute's Randal O'Toole provides a good primer on what is to come, how soon, and what that means for public policy. O'Toole notes that a recent poll of industry experts predicts self-driving cars will arrive on the market between 2020 and 2030.

Some combination of fully automated and partially automated cars will slowly gain market share over time, making the benefits of this technology more and more widespread.

*The Cato Institute's David Boaz with Google's self-driving car. ([Cato Institute](#))*

To address the policy implications of this new technology, we need to first look at how it is likely to affect our society, once most people have access to cars that require no human interaction.

The most direct implications are going to be simple: an increase in mobility and lowered costs of being mobile. This simple fact matters more than probably any other, and will mean huge changes to society and the public policy that goes along with it.

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First, people will have greater flexibility in where they choose to live, from the rural countryside to major cities. It also means that the time spent driving to work no longer requires a driver's attention to the road, freeing up more time for anything else one might want to do, from checking work email to reading a book.

The magnitude of time saved is hard to value, but it would amount to billions of hours per year for US Americans, saying nothing of the rest of the world. So, what does that mean for public policy?

It means expanded choice in where to live and work. Tasks which are a massive burden right now will be less of a problem in this new era. For example, Cato's Jason Bedrick [recently](#) pointed to the implications for school choice. Shuttling children to schools that are better suited for them, especially if they are far from home, can be a nightmare for parents to coordinate and are a massive time cost.

Self-driving cars mean more choice for parents. New and possibly better schools suddenly become available when they can let the car itself take care of the transportation. Furthermore, it means the slow unraveling of one of the biggest drivers of people to the suburbs: good public schools. Paired with evolving school choice, self-driving cars will help bring greater choice to where families decide to live.

Even better are the implications for cities. Many downtown areas are vibrant during the day, teeming with office workers communing in from the suburbs. With commuters comes the need for available parking. Underground parking is expensive to build, and raises the cost of constructing new buildings.

Surface parking lots eat up valuable downtown real estate that could otherwise be used for residences, offices, or some other purpose. A place where people drive to and leave their cars for the duration of their work day is simply a poor use of valuable land. It means the end of any real need for laws mandating minimum parking space requirements in cities, which raise the cost of housing.

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Even better, the technology facilitates car sharing, which means less need for urbanites to own a car themselves. Urban dwellers are always pining for lower rents, more jobs, and more parks and amenities. While by no means a silver bullet, this technology will certainly make those who choose to live in cities better off.

As the O'Toole study notes, self-driving cars have great potential to decrease congestion, decreasing travelers' total drive time. Even better, because self-driving cars do not make human errors and can adapt to traffic conditions in real time, they mean fewer accidents and less of the nightmarish traffic experienced in large cities.

Further, these changes will apply to delivery trucks as well. Imagine not having to worry how many hours the long-haul truck driver in the next lane has been awake. Less time wasted, less traffic, less risk, and more options for passengers — these are all great things.

So, what can policymakers do in response to these changes? First and foremost, as O'Toole and others argue, they should step aside and not react to changes prematurely. They should not attempt to use these changes as an excuse to protect any of the potentially harmed industries.

What they can do is to react after the fact to repeal obsolete regulations like the aforementioned mandatory parking minimums. Simply put: do no harm to the technology that will quickly change far more of the world than they understand. I don't think that's too much to ask.