



Rail transit advocates and governments are not ready for the robocar revolution

By Ken Braun

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Six years from now Nissan is expected to be selling “highly autonomous” vehicles, cars that mostly pilot themselves and need human operators only for “extraordinary” or “unanticipated” situations.

Google has done extensive testing of these smart cars on our roads and may have them in consumer hands as soon as 2017. Policy Implications of Autonomous Vehicles, a new analysis from the free market Cato Institute, asserts these machines and the market for them will be transforming our world for the better very soon, but that our governments aren’t ready for the robocar revolution at all.

One major misstep in the making is the mania of rail transit spending.

The federal government incentivizes cities to build highly expensive urban rail systems (such as subways and streetcars) on the assumption that Americans will gladly give up their cars and turn the driving over to the train operators. But trains can only deliver a tiny few from doorstep to doorstep, leaving the majority of intended customers needing personal cars to get from home to transit station, and even station to destination.

Transit requires \$3 in subsidies for every dollar paid in fares, and still the decades of spending hasn’t moved Americans out of their cars. But robocars really can do the driving to deliver from doorstep to destination and back, finally satisfying the overpromised convenience rail never fulfilled.

On the congestion front, consider the adaptive cruise controls already available in advanced passenger cars. These allow vehicles to automatically adjust speeds to a safe following distance with the car ahead. Studies have shown traffic congestion would be cut in half if just 20 percent of the cars on the road used this technology that’s already available. Robocars take this to

another level, controlling the stopping and basic navigation as well, allowing cars to operate much closer together and safer.

Within a decade or so, pervasive use of smart cars will obliterate the already fragile case for spending billions on rail transit. As a point of comparison, the Cato study notes that personal auto ownership leaped from five to 55 percent of American families 14 years after Henry Ford built his assembly line. Yet transit advocates and Congress keep shoveling cash into the transit furnace as if their dinosaurs can survive the meteor strike.

The argument for widespread and swift consumer acceptance of robocars isn't hard to make and has been made in this space before. A car that drives itself is worth vastly more than a conventional car to any purchaser because it adds years back to lives. Rather than lose a half dozen hours or more per week doing what a computer can do, a commuter can read, sleep, watch a movie or get a start on the workday. Average car buyers have an incentive to spend more for such convenience, and robocar makers have an incentive to find a price point where such miracles are available to most drivers. This same market magic allowed Ford to rapidly put the horse and buggy out of business.

The Cato study also worries the government may do too much to "help" the robocar revolution, such as insisting upon certain types of vehicle-to-vehicle communications rather than letting the manufacturers themselves figure it out. The argument here is similar to the transit car concern: Whatever the government decides to build will quickly become obsolete and retard progress rather than advance it.

The report advises the ideal role for politicians is to improve the roads and traffic signalling mechanisms we already have, which both alleviates traffic problems today and literally paves the way for a better future.