

City's embrace of self-driving technology at forefront of planning summit

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By Ed Blazina / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

For the past couple of years, Ronald Bogle has watched as researchers and transportation officials have talked about the upcoming changes that self-driving vehicles will bring to mobility and safety.

But as president and CEO of the American Architectural Foundation, Mr. Bogle said, he realized those groups were overlooking another major component that will have to adapt as society moves more to self-driving and shared vehicles: urban design in cities across the country. Fewer vehicles on the road could mean that cities need fewer parking facilities, different ways to use space now eaten up by parking and new street designs to help accommodate more people waiting for public transit or shared vehicles.

So the foundation teamed with the City of Pittsburgh — where self-driving vehicle research is way ahead of the curve — to bring the National Summit on Design and Urban Mobility to the area. The summit, which runs Wednesday through Friday, will bring in 120 delegates to develop a national design framework for cities to follow as the era of self-driving vehicles approaches.

“It just became obvious to us that there was not an adequate discussion about public policy and we should lead that discussion,” Mr. Bogle said last week. “It was just clear to me Pittsburgh was the place to do this.”

That’s because Pittsburgh — in addition to having Uber test its first self-driving vehicles here and hosting research leaders such as Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Pittsburgh and Ford’s Argo AI — has already shown an awareness of its need for policy change, Mr. Bogle said. He cited Mayor Bill Peduto’s initiatives such as creating a Department of Mobility and Infrastructure and establishing Envision Downtown as examples of the type of forward thinking other cities will have to do.

Mr. Bogle said it isn’t too soon for cities to begin planning for self-driving vehicles. Researchers and transportation experts keep moving up how soon self-driving vehicles will be widely deployed, he said, and the most recent estimate he’s hearing widely discussed is five to seven years.

“More and more people are using the term revolution rather than transformation for how this is going to happen,” he said.

Last fall, Pittsburgh policy planners, designers and research/technical experts took the first step toward planning for the future as one of 10 cities around the world to participate in a series of “design sprints” hosted by BuroHappold Engineers around the theme of “Connected and Autonomous Vehicles.” At the exercises, participants were asked to come up with ways to solve problems such as neighborhood changes as a result of increased dependence on self-driving vehicles.

“At the core of all this is how the places are going to work for people,” said Ray Gastil, city planning director. “This summit should show how we develop policy to lead to the type of urban core we want.”

Two areas the summit won’t consider are how cities should react to the decline in revenue from parking fees and traffic tickets and what will need to be done to retain workers who lose jobs as drivers and parking attendants as a result of the shift to shared and self-driving vehicles. Those issues are better left for groups such as the U.S. Conference of Mayors, Mr. Gastil said.

One change Mr. Bogle expects with a growing reliance on self-driving vehicles is a move away from suburbs and back into urban areas as a nod to the need for sustainability. A question the summit will try to address is whether public policy should go out of its way to push a return to urbanization or “let the marketplace come to its own solution,” he said.

“Density and sustainability are pretty compatible. Sprawl and sustainability aren’t compatible,” he said.

For the summit, experts will be divided into three groups to deal with public policy, use of public space and the effect on people and where they will live. The groups will report back on Friday for open discussion on their recommendations, and the architectural foundation is expected to issue a report with a national framework in early June.

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