



PennDOT plays role in self-driving testing site proposal

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By Ed Blazina / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation has submitted a joint application on behalf of Pittsburgh, Penn State University and the Pocono Raceway to be designated a national testing area for self-driving vehicles by the federal Department of Transportation.

The designation, which initially doesn't include any federal funding, would require the selected areas to follow national testing standards, share testing information and participate in committees reviewing testing data. U.S. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx sought proposals for the "National Proving Ground for Automated Vehicle Technologies" in November and the department is expected to designate selected areas by the end of April.

Erin Waters-Trassat, a spokeswoman for PennDOT, said it "makes sense" for the state to file a joint application so the department can act as the lead agency coordinating activities at each location. In addition to the testing sites, the state has technical support from the Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pennsylvania, which work closely with federal officials on transportation issues, and the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission.

As a group, Ms. Waters-Trassat said, the testing sites offer a variety of training opportunities that should put the state in a strong position in the competition. The state, which late last year released its own testing guideline recommendations for self-driving vehicles, said in its application that it is "uniquely positioned to provide oversight and legal support to testers and testing facilities alike."

For example, Pittsburgh's urban streets are being used by Uber and Carnegie Mellon University to test their self-driving vehicles and is using smart traffic signals that adjust based on traffic. Penn State has a track for self-driving transit vehicles and Pocono's race track has a 3,700-foot straightaway ideal for testing vehicles at high speeds.

Because all of the sites have different capabilities, "a matrix approach combines the strengths of each into a more compelling application," the state said.

Many of the same government, education and industry representatives who helped to develop the state's proposed testing guidelines would serve on an advisory panel that would work with PennDOT if the state wins the designation. Ms. Waters-Trassat said the joint application also may put the state in a strong position to obtain funding for expansion of the existing facilities if money becomes available.

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