



Brian O'Neill: Driverless car revolution may happen in Pittsburgh

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The Airport Busway meets the Parkway West/Interstate 376 in Carnegie.



By Brian O'Neill / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Have you ever been late to a party and found yourself right on time?

Mayor Bill Peduto was making exactly this case when he had his monthly interview on WESA-FM's "Essential Pittsburgh" last week. Partly because our region dawdled in extending light rail, he argued, we have more than 18 miles of busways that leave us uniquely poised to harness Uber brainpower and make driverless vehicles commonplace here before the rest of the world beats us to them.

"All of a sudden we may have an advantage over those who built those fixed systems years ago," Mr. Peduto said.

Is he right? We could know in just a few years.

Uber announced a partnership more than a year ago with Carnegie Mellon University to develop self-driving cars. It quickly grabbed 40 of CMU's robotics researchers for its payroll, a move that

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- Rickshaw
- Yacht
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seemed a bit too punk rock to some, but Uber and the Academics are still together and aim to take us where no human need take the wheel.

The multibillion-dollar company does this in some buildings at the edge of the Strip District that, from the outside, look about as posh as the set of “Sanford & Son.” Uber is famously hush-hush and when I contacted its San Francisco headquarters, a spokesperson emailed links to year-old press releases and said the company is committed to Pittsburgh and the company’s Advanced Technologies Center here.

Uber, only seven years old, is betting big on driverless cars. Its 39-year-old CEO Travis Kalanick has spoken of eliminating fatal accidents and freeing up commuters’ time during rush hours, and argues that cities that embrace these “disruption waves” will be the ones that succeed in the 21st century.

Mr. Peduto is on board. Pittsburgh is one of seven finalists for some \$50 million in the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Smart City Challenge. Mr. Peduto says if the city wins that money, sweeping changes can happen sooner but, either way, autonomous vehicles are coming and the city’s partnerships will have us ahead of the curve.

That’s why he’s uninterested in billion-dollar dreams for massive expansion of light rail. Not only is federal, state and local money not there, such a strategy could mean putting billions of dollars into something people might not even be using in 30 years.

The Port of Authority of Allegheny County owns the busways but it wouldn’t comment on this because it’s in the midst of negotiations with Amalgamated Transit Union Local 85, representing drivers, mechanics and operations staff.

Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald said there’s no question autonomous-vehicle technology is coming and we should want it done here. Pittsburgh has been in the forefront of technological innovation since the days of Andrew Carnegie and George Westinghouse, and those busways can be development tools.

I reminded Mr. Fitzgerald that nearby residents are already wary of the Junction Hollow public private-transit route that would link CMU with the Almono development in Hazelwood, where Uber also is. I also suggested that Port Authority bus drivers might be as wary of driverless vehicles as I would be of writerless newspapers.

“You’re not going to stop technology,” he said.

He expects that Junction Hollow transit route to be a boon to the neighborhoods it skirts, and likewise expects there will be good jobs maintaining any driverless fleet. Work displacement is a reality of modern life, but that doesn’t mean there can’t be soft landings with forethought.

Steve Palonis, president of the transit local, said Uber presents a multitude of issues but there are protections in the contract dating to the days of Skybus, a 1960s Westinghouse innovation that never got beyond its elevated test track in South Park.

He said Mr. Fitzgerald and Mr. Peduto are “good guys” so he doesn’t believe public busways would be simply turned over to private operation like Uber. Its strategy built on car trips set up by smartphones is still a lot less affordable than a bus ride.

“If this comes to fruition,” he said, “we’ll deal with it.”

It’s coming, Mr. Peduto assured “Essential Pittsburgh” listeners. “All the pieces of the puzzle are there.”

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Patrick Miner 17 hours ago
Uber is a blessing in Pittsburgh, given poor cab service and never having built the city-wide subway system imagined in the 1920's.

But Pittsburgh would be wise to completely max out accommodations for non-motorized transportation (walking, biking), before giving more valuable resources over to automobiles. By "wise", I mean fiscally conservative and supportive of improved public health outcomes.

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