



ROBOT CARS vs. TRANSIT

When it comes to addressing urban transportation problems, autonomous vehicles are not the answer. And yet, the savior fantasy endures. Op-ed pages across the US continue to publish warnings that the impending arrival of AVs makes new transit investment unwise. An Assemblywoman in Los Angeles just hosted an autonomous vehicle summit, claiming that the technology is "just around the corner." The Koch brother's AV propaganda helped to sink the recent Nashville transportation referendum. As Denver, Austin, and other cities consider future transit ballot measures or projects, this type of discourse will likely return.

It's imperative that we push back against this hype, most of which is fueled by the tech industry itself, think-tanks who have an existential interest in seeing transit fail, or politicians unwilling to make hard choices about how to allocate space in crowded cities. AVs do not yet exist, and there's a growing consensus that getting beyond the testing phase, if it happens at all, will take much longer than promised.

Cars - autonomous or otherwise - are not transit, which is by far the most efficient way to move thousands of people through dense cities. Too many decision makers are ducking improvements to today's bus and rail service because of a promise of future technology. Many cities are growing rapidly, and inequality is worsening. The time for transit investment is now.

3 arguments against AV hucksterism



1. Cars are not transit

We've said it before and we'll say it again: cars hog space. The increased congestion ridesharing has created in big cities portends what an autonomous future would look like - far more traffic, longer travel times, and more empty vehicle trips. High-capacity transit makes the most efficient use of scarce urban space, making cities more affordable and sustainable.

- Dedicated right of way for bus and rail can move 10,000-25,000 people per hour, while private vehicles of any type can only move 600-1,600.
- Research shows that for-hire vehicles in Manhattan spend 40% of their time unoccupied, and there's nothing to suggest that autonomous vehicles would be any different.
- Rides in AV's won't be shared without strong pricing incentives - a measure TNCS and cities have been reluctant to take.

2. Agencies & city leaders need to set clear goals for experiments with autonomous technology

Facing pressure from boosters, transit agencies have been partnering with ridesharing companies to test autonomous shuttles in Houston, Buffalo, and Atlanta. But the goals for such programs are often ill-defined and have yielded meager benefits.

- Transit agencies should run transit - not use limited resources to test technology with unproven utility. Running shuttles in parking lots does very little to demonstrate how such technology would perform in chaotic streetscapes.
- Transit agencies that experiment need clear intentions for new services - like improved access, increased ridership, or safer streets - and a plan to measure results against those goals.

3. Real-world technology can make transit more competitive

Instead of allowing politicians and tech boosters to sound their death knell, transit systems should harness technology, both new and old, to make transit more competitive.

- To stave off ridership declines, cities like San Francisco, Seattle, and New York City are using transit signal priority and bus-only lanes to make local bus service faster, more frequent, and reliable. But they need to redouble these efforts.
- Transit agencies should also take a cue from ridesharing companies and make payment for transit simple as the click of a button or the tap of a card, as TriMET's HOP card has done in Portland.
- Data platforms like SharedStreets can provide cities with information about how their curb space is being used, and can help make the argument for less on-street parking and more space for transit.