

Michigan lets autonomous cars on roads without human driver

December 9 2016, by Tom Krisher



Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder signs legislation that establishes comprehensive regulations for the testing, use and eventual sale of autonomous vehicle technology at the Automotive Hall of Fame in Dearborn, Mich., on Friday Dec. 9, 2016. The package of bills signed into law Friday comes with few specific state regulations and leaves many decisions up to automakers and companies like Google and Uber. It also allows automakers and tech companies to run autonomous taxi services and permits test parades of self-driving tractor-trailers as long as humans are in each truck. (Romain Blanquart/Detroit Free Press via AP)

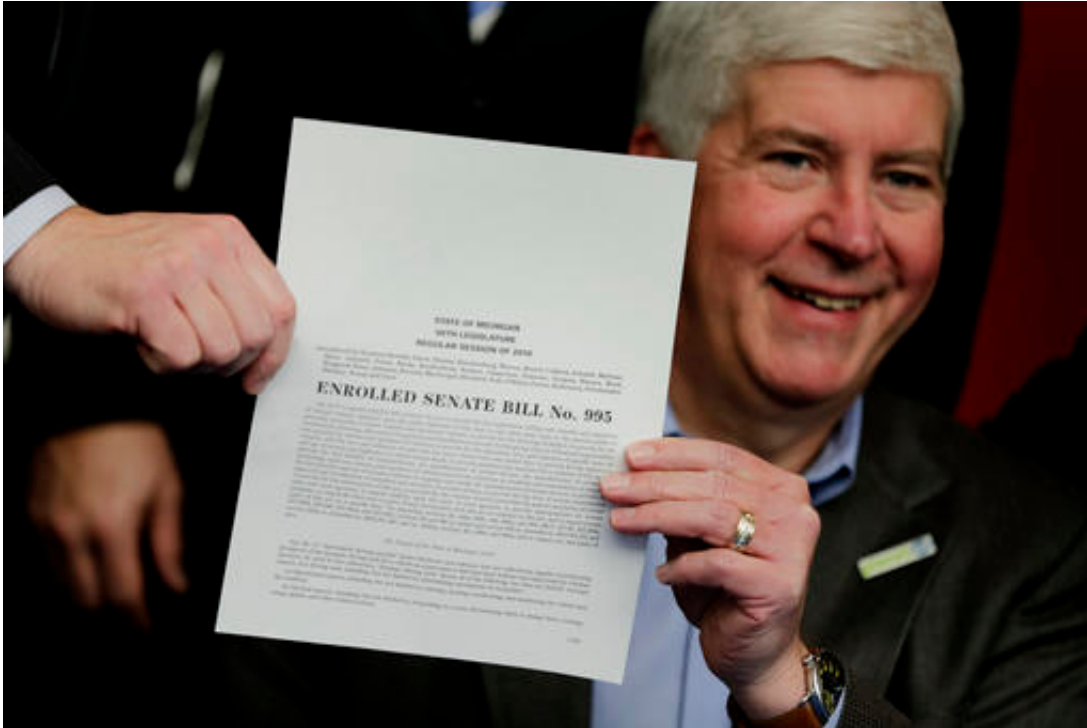
Companies can now test self-driving cars on Michigan public roads without a driver or steering wheel under new laws that could push the state to the forefront of autonomous vehicle development.

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It also allows automakers and tech companies to run autonomous taxi services and permits test parades of self-driving tractor-trailers as long as humans are in each truck. And they allow the sale of self-driving vehicles to the public once they are tested and certified, according to the state.

The bills allow testing without burdensome regulations so the industry can move forward with potential life-saving technology, said Gov. Rick Snyder, who signed the bills. "It makes Michigan a place where particularly for the auto industry it's a good place to do work," he said.

The bills give Michigan the potential to be a leader by giving the companies more autonomy than say, California, which now requires human backup drivers in case something goes awry.



Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder poses for a photograph after signing legislation that establishes comprehensive regulations for the testing, use and eventual sale of autonomous vehicle technology at the Automotive Hall of Fame in Dearborn, Mich., on Friday Dec. 9, 2016. The package of bills signed into law Friday comes with few specific state regulations and leaves many decisions up to automakers and companies like Google and Uber. It also allows automakers and tech companies to run autonomous taxi services and permits test parades of self-driving tractor-trailers as long as humans are in each truck. (Romain Blanquart/Detroit Free Press via AP)

Here are answers to some questions about the laws:

Q: Companies are making a lot of the decisions in putting the cars on [public roads](#). Why does the state think they'll be safe?

A: Michigan Transportation Director Kirk Steudle says the laws put Michigan ahead of most other states with the possible exception of

Florida in specifically allowing tests without a human driver. Companies, he said, will make the decision as to when the cars are ready for that, based on more than a century of experience of testing cars on public roads. Automakers have a long history of testing cars on public roads in Michigan with few, if any, incidents, Steudle says. The cars also have to comply with federal safety standards and may have to be certified as roadworthy by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration if proposed federal guidelines are adopted. "I don't want to regulate the vehicles. There is nobody in state government that has any knowledge to be able to say that vehicle is ready to go on the road," Steudle said. If the vehicles crash, Steudle says they would be governed by Michigan's no-fault insurance laws that require each driver's insurance to pay for damage. The companies also could be sued under product liability laws, he says. The self-driving laws also allow only reputable companies such as automakers and [tech companies](#) to do tests, Steudle says. "These are responsible parties," says Snyder.

Q: Does this put the state ahead in allowing self-driving vehicles on public roads?

A: Michigan Transportation Director Kirk Steudle says the laws put Michigan ahead of most other states with the possible exception of Florida in specifically allowing tests without a human driver. Companies, he said, will make the decision as to when the cars are ready for that, based on more than a century of experience of testing cars on public roads. Steudle says yes because the laws specifically authorize use without human drivers. He also says Michigan has an advantage over Florida and warm-weather states because companies can test in snow. But Bryant Walker Smith, a law professor at the University of South Carolina who tracks the technology, says Florida has almost no restrictions. Other states, he said, don't expressly prohibit such testing and have agreements with individual companies to do it. Michigan's laws also make defining who is a driver ambiguous, he said. Drivers could be

companies running autonomous taxi services, engineers who start autonomous vehicles, passengers who ride in the cars and the automated systems themselves, he said.

Q: Unlike California, Michigan isn't tracking autonomous car crashes. How will the state spot problems?

A: Police will investigate any crashes and presumably would report any trends to the state, which could suspend a [company's](#) manufacturer license plates and end the tests, Steudle says. He concedes that there will be crashes and probably a fatality involving [autonomous cars](#). But the technology can eliminate human errors that cause 94 percent of crashes and cut the 100 highway deaths in the U.S. every day, he said. "It's a risk worth taking because the future of the technologies we know are going to help reduce those crashes and reduce those fatalities," Steudle said.

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