

Lyft to unleash self-driving cars on Bay Area roads

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Self-driving Lyfts are coming to the Bay Area, promising to give area residents a first-hand look at the technology that's poised to dramatically change the nature of transportation.

Lyft will launch a pilot fleet of [self-driving cars](#) to pick up local passengers, the San Francisco-based ride-hailing company said Thursday, though it didn't reveal an exact start date. The announcement comes as Lyft is accelerating its efforts to dominate the self-driving car market and compete with the likes of Uber, Google and Tesla - Lyft recently opened a new autonomous vehicle hub in Palo Alto and earlier this summer announced plans to bring self-driving cars to Boston.

Now Lyft plans to unleash autonomous vehicles on busy Bay Area roads, where they will have to interact with local drivers, bicyclists and pedestrians, representing a crucial test of the technology. Lyft has teamed up with another startup - Drive.ai - which already has obtained the necessary permits from state regulators to test self-driving cars on public roads. The partnership is a signal that Lyft learned its lesson from the failure of competitor Uber's self-driving car launch in San Francisco last year.

Mountain View-based Drive.ai, born from Stanford University's Artificial Intelligence Lab, has been testing its self-driving cars on California roads for more than a year.

"The majority of the world hasn't seen autonomous vehicles," said

Drive.ai co-founder and president Carol Reiley. "For them to have a chance to actually ride in an AV car is just so exciting. We really want to start making this a reality and start bringing this to real customers - this isn't just a demo."

Lyft customers will be able to opt-in to the pilot program, and when they use the Lyft app to summon a ride, they might be matched with an autonomous car free of charge. A safety driver will be behind the wheel, ready to take control if needed, Reiley said.

The cars, which will belong to Drive.ai - not Lyft - will be four-door sedans outfitted with Drive.ai's self-driving sensors and software. Neither Reiley nor Lyft would say where in the Bay Area the cars will be available.

Because Drive.ai already has the California permit, Lyft may avoid repeating the fiasco that was Uber's San Francisco autonomous vehicle launch. Uber rolled out a fleet of self-driving cars in December, but the ride-hailing giant refused to apply for the \$150 testing permit. After a contentious, week-long stand-off, the California Department of Motor Vehicles pulled the Uber cars' registrations and forced them off the road.

Uber finally backed down in March and agreed to apply for the permit, which the DMV granted. Now Uber's cars are back on the streets of San Francisco - but not picking up passengers. The high-profile fight helped cement Uber's reputation as a bull-headed rule-breaker.

Lyft doesn't plan to apply for a permit either, but by teaming up with a partner that already has one, Lyft is signaling yet again that it's the "good guy" in the ride-hailing field. Even prior to Thursday's announcement, Lyft has taken advantage of a recent string of scandals plaguing Uber - including allegations of sexual harassment and other inappropriate behavior at the office, a lawsuit accusing Uber of stealing rival Waymo's

self-driving car technology, and a criminal probe into Uber's use of a software tool to evade law enforcement stings. Meanwhile, Lyft is touting its feel-good policies - such as a program that lets passengers round-up their fares and donate that money to charity. And Lyft is growing quickly. The smaller ride-hailing company last week announced its platform is live across 40 states.

But Uber has a head start in the self-driving car market. Uber has been picking up passengers in autonomous vehicles in Pittsburgh since 2016, and earlier this year launched a similar pilot in Arizona. Lyft has yet to launch its own self-driving fleet, though in June the startup announced plans to bring autonomous cars to Boston via a partnership with nuTonomy. A Lyft spokeswoman on Wednesday said the company remains on track to launch the Boston pilot in the coming months.

These pilot programs bring Lyft one step closer to reaching its ultimate goal of a driverless future. In 2016, Lyft President John Zimmer predicted that [autonomous vehicles](#) will account for the majority of Lyft rides within five years. And getting real people to test the technology plays a major role in facilitating its wide-spread deployment, said Bryant Walker Smith, a Stanford Law School researcher and self-driving car expert.

"It's a very important step, to invite the public into these vehicles," he said. "People tend to feel more favorable about automated driving once they've experienced these types of demonstrations."

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