

# Is Silicon Valley ready for fully autonomous Waymo vehicles?

November 28 2018, by Levi Sumagaysay

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Waymo, the first company to get approval from the Department of Motor Vehicles to test fully self-driving vehicles on California roads, faces questions and concerns galore as it prepares to roll out the cars in Silicon Valley.

For example, what happens if one of its vehicles—which won't have a driver behind the wheel—gets into an accident?

The self-driving Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid, equipped with a two-way cellular communication link, will notify Waymo's fleet-response specialists. Those specialists will call 911 if needed. Then Waymo will send a response team to help passengers and first responders on the scene.

That's what Waymo has shared on its website and with police, including officers in Los Altos, one of the cities where the company will be doing the testing.

"Waymo has been very proactive and very cognizant of community concerns," said Captain Scott McCrossin of the Los Altos Police Department.

Waymo first talked to Los Altos city officials in April, when the company submitted an application to test its fully driverless vehicles to the DMV. In late October, the DMV approved Waymo's application for testing in five cities. Besides Los Altos, the cars will be tested in Los

Altos Hills, Mountain View, Sunnyvale and Palo Alto.

The Alphabet-owned company has not publicly announced when testing will begin, and the cities say they have not been informed of a timeline.

But Waymo has been engaged in various levels of outreach, according to those cities' representatives and correspondence included in the company's application with the DMV.

Waymo held a [safety training](#) for first responders in September where the company explained its safety and law-enforcement interaction protocols, McCrossin said. In September and October, Waymo held public forums in Los Altos and Los Altos Hills.

Over the summer, Waymo displayed a self-driving [vehicle](#) at the Sunnyvale library. In September, the company was at a tech expo downtown. And Waymo has held a training session with the city's public-safety officials.

In Palo Alto, there's a public forum scheduled Nov. 27 at 6 p.m. at the Cubberley Community Center, where residents will hear from Waymo and get a chance to ask questions. The police department is in talks with the company about scheduling a meeting.

Mountain View has asked the other cities to meet on Dec. 6 and is planning a public forum Dec. 13. Mountain View police recently met with Waymo, and they are talking about a future training session.

Is that outreach enough? In Silicon Valley, Google/Waymo's self-driving cars with drivers behind the wheel have been a common sight for a long time. Each accident involving the vehicles—17 so far this year—has been documented, as required by the DMV. But despite Waymo's years of testing, its move to fully driverless vehicles on public roads concerns

some Silicon Valley residents.

"I followed a Waymo on Castro, the principal street in Mountain View, and it proceeded at 12 mph (in a 25 mph zone) with a queue of cars behind and caught us all at a red light," John Joss said last week. "It then turned right after stopping but only gave a turn signal after it had stopped. Severely dumb."

The 84-year-old Mountain View resident added that when a Waymo vehicle reaches the intersection of Cuesta and Bonita Avenue, "it goes into a state of fibrillation, saying, 'oh, we can't go, we can't turn!'"

"It's too soon" for fully autonomous vehicles, Joss said.

Other residents agree. Karen Brenchley said she recently saw a Waymo vehicle make a right turn from a left-turn lane.

"I'm like, 'Did that really happen?'" said the 55-year-old Sunnyvale resident, who has a master's degree in computer science and works in artificial intelligence. "Thirty years ago I took an AI class in grad school. One of the things we wrote was how to change lights based on traffic patterns. We're still trying to figure that out. How long have we had self-driving cars? I'm delighted that they're doing what they're doing, but I think they're not ready."

The company is hearing people's concerns. In September, Barbara McCarthy of Los Altos saw a Waymo vehicle fail to stop at an intersection with a flashing light, which means pedestrians were getting ready to cross. She was concerned enough that she contacted Waymo.

"They were very helpful," McCarthy, 67, said. She spoke with a community manager by phone and email. That made her feel like Waymo will take residents' concerns into account, she said.

In Phoenix, Waymo has been testing a fully autonomous program since April 2017. There, Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid minivans shuttle early-rider volunteers to work, school, the mall and elsewhere. The company has signed up more than 400 riders since it began the program, and a recent report indicates that it will start a new driverless car service in the area next month.

In Silicon Valley, Waymo's first testers will be its own employees. Then it will open up the program to members of the public, as it has done in Arizona. The company will test vehicles day and night on city streets, rural roads and highways with speed limits of up to 65 miles per hour. The DMV approved testing of 39 vehicles, all Chrysler Pacifica Hybrids.

Waymo started as Google's self-driving car division in 2009 before it was spun off as a standalone subsidiary in 2016. Last month, Waymo CEO John Krafcik boasted that its vehicles had reached 10 million miles driven on public roads in 25 cities.

Merely having all those miles under its belt is not enough, some critics say.

"The DMV is letting Waymo turn all of us into human guinea pigs for testing their robot cars, without an adequate explanation of what's going on," said John Simpson, Privacy and Technology Project director for Consumer Watchdog, a longtime Google critic, in a statement at the time the California DMV announced its approval of Waymo's permit.

In an interview, Simpson expressed concern about Waymo's plan for remote "drivers" who will be monitoring the vehicles. A Waymo spokeswoman would not say how many vehicles at a time each remote driver will be watching.

"It's like they're playing a video game," he said, "but if something goes

wrong, somebody might get killed."

Consumer Watchdog also is urging the DMV to release more information about Waymo's insurance coverage, pointing to redactions in its insurance documents.

But DMV spokesman Marty Greenstein said Waymo has met the agency's requirements: "The insurance information was redacted from Waymo's public application because it was deemed to relate to confidential business strategies that have competitive significance."

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