

Florida law to allow autonomous cars—when they're ready

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The finalized prototype of Google self-driving car. Credit: Google

Self-driving vehicles with no humans on board will be able to operate in Florida—once they're finally ready for prime time—under a bill signed Thursday by Gov. Ron DeSantis.

DeSantis said he hopes to use the law to lure companies that test and build the cars. The measure, which takes effect July 1, also opens the

door for on-demand ride companies such as Lyft and Uber to eventually deploy fleets of the vehicles in Florida. That does not mean, however, that such cars will appear on public streets around the state anytime soon. Self-driving vehicles without a human operator are largely still in the testing stage.

DeSantis and state lawmakers said they want to show that Florida will be ready when the cars are.

"As soon as companies are ready to roll them out, they'll be able to get onto our roadways," said Republican state Rep. Jason Fischer, who sponsored the bill. Fischer called the legislation "the best law in the country."

"This will allow ultimate flexibility for companies," he said.

As of March, the most recent month for which information is available, 29 states had passed laws related to autonomous vehicles, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. They range from authorizing testing to allowing the vehicles to operate without humans. Two other states besides Florida that allow people-free vehicles are Michigan and Texas.

It may be quite some time before any state sees its streets populated by cars driven with no human help. Waymo, an offshoot of Google, had operated a very limited program using autonomous vehicles with no drivers in the Phoenix area, but now requires a human behind the wheel to take control of its robotaxis in emergencies. Las Vegas and other cities have used autonomous vehicles with human "safety drivers" in case of a vehicle malfunction.

Florida's new law will allow self-driving cars without humans on all of the state's roads as long as the vehicles meet insurance and safety

requirements outlined in the legislation. It requires that owners of autonomous vehicles have a minimum of \$1 million in insurance coverage, regardless of whether the vehicles are for personal or commercial use. The law also requires that the owner immediately report crashes to law enforcement or that the vehicles have a system in place to report them.

Florida is hoping to siphon high-paying technology jobs away from California, where dozens of companies have already been testing autonomous vehicles with backup drivers on public roads for several years.

"With this bill, Florida officially has an open-door policy to autonomous vehicle companies and I encourage them to relocate from California to Florida," DeSantis said before signing the legislation at a state-run autonomous vehicle test track in the central Florida city of Auburndale.

"This helps chart a course to a bolder, brighter and smarter future in transportation and embraces the innovation revolution that will bring high-paying jobs to the state while making our roads safer."

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