

California taking the lead with self-driving cars

By Tony Bizjak, Sacramento Bee

California is quietly positioning itself at the leading edge of what could be the biggest revolution in daily travel since the day the buggy was unhitched from the horse.

The self-driving, or autonomous, car, seen by many as a "Jetsons"-like futuristic dream, may be less than a decade from commercial reality, some researchers now say, pushed forward in good part by an unlikely California company – Web giant Google.

"We may be at a historic cusp where driverless cars share the road," said Carroll Lachnit, an editor at the car information site Edmunds.com. "The (technological) pieces are all there."

The concept excites many who say the technology will lead to fewer crashes and less wasted commute time. There will be less stop-and-go traffic, they say. Self-driving vehicles won't slow down to gawk at things beside the road, a major cause of congestion.

Intrigued by the idea of eliminating human error from driving, a California legislator has introduced a bill to clarify that driverless cars are street legal.

Researchers, notably Google, more known for Web search engines than car components, already are producing test cars that drive on their own in traffic on city streets and freeways.

But the push is generating concerns about the reliability of the technology and questions about whether Californians, known for their love of driving, will turn over control of their cars to computers and sensors.

To highlight the technology, Google recently produced a video that follows a seeing-impaired man as he heads out on a taco run in Google's fully autonomous Toyota Prius. He sits in the driver's seat, but only as a passenger, as the car takes him to a Taco Bell drive-through lane.

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