

# 'Grandkids won't learn': New driverless car push

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San Francisco | Authorities are laying the groundwork for self-driving cars in Australia as autonomous taxi services expand in the United States, creating new transport modes but threatening hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Residents in the American cities of San Francisco, Phoenix and Los Angeles can already book driverless taxis from Google's Waymo division via an app similar to Uber.

Elon Musk's Tesla is working on a "robotaxi" and Amazon's Zoox division, co-founded but no longer run by Australian entrepreneur Tim Kentley Klay, is privately testing its autonomous cars.

For now though, Google's Waymo is in the lead. The customised Jaguar cars are fitted with an array of spinning exterior sensors to navigate and a steering wheel that turns itself but quickly felt normal in *The Australian Financial Review's* testing.

In multiple day and night trips, the cars arrived in minutes, drove smoothly and obeyed road rules – but nudged boundaries as a human driver would. For example, Waymo vehicles partially crossed centre road lines when a pedestrian was blocking a lane and inched out into an intersection where views were obstructed.

The ubiquity of the cars in the three cities – albeit mostly not on highways – shows why Australia is now moving on self-driving car regulation.

The federal transport department and National Transport Commission closed submissions on a nationwide



Waymo cars are ubiquitous on the streets of San Francisco, a city with sedate traffic and a large tech industry. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

plan to regulate self-driving cars on June 11.

It would require the companies that make self-driving cars to take responsibility for accidents, rather than the people riding in the vehicles. The companies would also have to meet safety thresholds to operate.

Legalising self-driving cars in Australia could allow roads to fit more vehicles, which could drive closer together and reduce accidents.

But, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, more than 730,000 people work in Australia's transport, postal and warehousing sector, threatened by rising automation. Federal Transport Minister Catherine King's office was contacted for comment.

Self-driving vehicles are banned on Australia's roads, though there have been limited tests, including one in the Queensland town of Mt Isa and another of autonomous trucks on

Transurban's Melbourne freeways.

A longer test by Transurban involving just two trucks, which would have been monitored by human supervisors riding on every trip, was scheduled for April – but suspended after Transport Workers Union pressure.

Transurban declined to comment but its chief executive Michelle Jablko predicted last week that self-driving cars would be a huge, if slow moving, change. "I learned to drive in a manual

car, my kids are learning in automatic cars," Ms Jablko said. "My grandkids [will] probably never learn to drive."

For all the progress, the American self-driving car companies have issues both minor and major.

One Waymo repeatedly failed to make a left turn to enter a carpark where *The Australian Financial Review* was waiting. Another drove close enough to a passing vehicle that the driver sounded his horn, leaving the Waymo's occupants feeling powerless.

Those incidents pale in comparison to General Motors' Cruise autonomous taxi service, which pulled its cars off the road last year after one dragged a San Francisco pedestrian after a crash.

A spokeswoman for Waymo declined to comment. But the company has published research from Swiss Re, an insurance giant, claiming its cars are safer than those driven by humans. In data released last year, Waymo said its cars reduced injury rates by 85 per cent over 11 million kilometres driven.

Transport Workers Union boss Michael Kaine said automation and artificial intelligence would change "our entire transport landscape", just as the gig economy had. "Around the world governments are scrambling so they're not behind the eight-ball when it comes to AI, which will affect not just transport but every industry."

But he said the Australian government's plans for the Fair Work Commission regulate the industry would ensure that AI was handled properly.

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*The reporter travelled to the United States as a guest of Canva.*