

The case for driverless cars in Wisconsin



10 HOURS AGO • [JACK CRAVER | THE CAPITAL TIMES | JCRAVER@MADISON.COM](#)

If his 56 years in the Legislature have given state Sen. Fred Risser, D-Madison, a keen sense of history, they do not prevent him from looking to the future.

As was [recently reported](#), the nation's longest-serving legislator recently drafted a proposal to allow driverless cars to be tested on the state's roads.

"This idea is not to be laughed at," says Risser, anticipating [ridicule](#) from those unfamiliar with the

technology. "It sounds strange but as I understand it, both Germany and Japan are working on this, Google's working on this. If they were going to test it out in this state we would have to authorize it."

Florida, California and Nevada have already passed similar legislation. What do all three states have in common (besides high unemployment)? All lack cold weather of the type we're seeing this week in Wisconsin.

"If they want to test it on winter weather here's a good place to start out," Risser says.

Indeed, the vehicles would get particularly good practice learning to navigate icy roads in Risser's district, where, because of a city policy to protect the lakes, non-arterial roads are not salted.

There is already quite a bit of hype about "autonomous vehicles" online. The hope is that robotic cars will be more competent and reliable than human ones. At the very least, robotic cars are less likely to drive drunk — an advantage of particular salience in Wisconsin.

Some even suggest self-driving cars could upend the entire model of American transportation, since such vehicles could essentially become low-cost taxis, picking up and dropping off users around town, thus reducing the incentive to own a car.

"How many people will even bother owning cars if they can buy a share in a car service for a quarter of the price with a guaranteed wait maximum of five minutes, or for a 10th of the price with a maximum wait of 15 minutes," asks [Kevin Drum](#), a blogger for Mother Jones. "Not too many."

Fewer people owning cars would lead to fewer parking lots needed and free up space for more nature or more useful development. Indeed, traffic and parking are common headaches the city considers when evaluating a proposed commercial or residential development.

[Felix Salmon](#), an economics blogger for Reuters, argues that a network of driverless cars would be far preferable to existing public transportation, including rail. The cars not only offer more flexible transportation, but don't necessarily demand as great of a financial commitment from local governments, since much of the costs can be shouldered by the companies making the cars and the people using them. (There would still, of course, be public elements of any transportation plan, including the building of the roads and likely subsidies for low-income users.)

Thus, he says, communities seeking to develop their infrastructure in the coming years face tough decisions on whether to invest in traditional transit that could be obsolete (or at least inferior) decades from now. To wit:

"We're not in a self-driving-car utopia yet, and the transportation problems we have are both real and solvable using rail. So do we use the tools we have, or do we wait and hope that future technology will solve our problems in a more efficient way?"

That's hardly a dilemma in Wisconsin, where Gov. Scott Walker in 2010 ran on a promise of killing high-speed rail in the state. And, given the governor and state [Legislature's commitment to funding roads](#), it's difficult to envision what the arguments against Risser's bill would be.

Risser says he is circulating the bill for co-sponsorship now and should know how much support it has by the end of the week.

Jack Craver



Jack Craver joined The Capital Times in January 2012 to write about state and local politics. As a UW-Madison student, he founded a local political blog, The Sconz, which became a popular source of news and commentary on campus, city and state issues.

