

**BAY AREA**

# This Bay Area county is eager to put autonomous vehicles on the road. Here's why

By **Ricardo Cano**, Reporter

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Zach Zeliff, center, with Glydways, gives a demonstration of an autonomous vehicle shuttle during its unveiling outside the Roundhouse Market and Conference Center in San Ramon. The company is manufacturing Contra Costa County's AV shuttles.

Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

The rapid expansion of driverless robotaxis has drawn considerable pushback from officials in San Francisco and the Peninsula who argue that the self-driving technology hasn't proven to be ready for mass deployment.

Across the bay, however, one county is striking a different tone on autonomous vehicles and is eager to put them on local roads.

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If Contra Costa County officials' vision for the future becomes reality, on-demand, autonomous vehicles would share public roads with private cars and public transit, transporting elderly residents to their local grocery store.

Driverless shuttles would carry residents living in the county's remote corners to BART's Antioch Station. And residents who use wheelchairs would be able to hail an accessible driverless vehicle with a human attendant available for assistance to commute to hospital appointments.



The Presto Autonomous Vehicle for mobility is parked outside the Roundhouse Market and Conference Center in San Ramon.

Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

Contra Costa County officials' enthusiasm for autonomous vehicles comes at a time when leaders in other cities and counties in the Bay Area have grown wary of the technology.

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Citing San Francisco's spotty experience with robotaxi companies Waymo and Cruise, a Bay Area lawmaker introduced a bill in the state Legislature that aims to curtail the commercial expansion of self-driving cars by giving cities the power to place restrictions on how and when they can operate. Another bill would prohibit testing and deploying long-haul driverless trucks in the state without a human backup driver.

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But officials in Contra Costa, for years, have been planning to deploy their own autonomous vehicles to solve an endemic issue for the suburban county, where many trips are less than two miles and often require driving a private vehicle — even to use public transit.

“We have a first- and last-mile problem,” said Tim Haile, executive director of the Contra Costa Transportation Authority. “We feel we can really address a lot of use

cases and gaps in the current transportation network with shared autonomous vehicles, so that led us to really investing in better understanding this technology and how to use it in a safe way.”



The Aurora Autonomous 18-wheeler is parked outside the Roundhouse Market and Conference Center in San Ramon. Contra Costa County has become an advocate for advancing autonomous vehicles.

Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

The county’s AV deployment began last year with the launch of two autonomous shuttles that operate a fixed-route across sprawling Bishop Ranch, a 600-acre business hub in San Ramon. The free shuttles tend to fill during lunchtime with Bishop Ranch workers bound for shops and restaurants in the hub’s commercial center.

This summer the East Bay county will deploy three wheelchair-accessible autonomous shuttles that will provide on-demand transportation to Contra Costa

Regional Medical Center in Martinez for nearby patients. As part of the project, the county is training some paratransit bus drivers to become safety attendants who assist riders boarding the autonomous vehicles.

The Contra Costa Transportation Authority will also deploy two autonomous shuttles in the gated adult community of Rossmoor in Walnut Creek by this summer. The shuttles will be primarily used to transport senior residents to the community hub, which includes a popular fitness center, on the northern end of Rossmoor.

Like the Bishop Ranch AV shuttles, the Rossmoor and county hospital autonomous shuttles will operate on public roads shared with human drivers.



Contra Costa County is preparing to launch a 28-mile closed circuit autonomous vehicle system that would link four east county cities by robot shuttles.

Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

By 2028, county officials expect to launch the first segment of Contra Costa's most ambitious AV project — a 28-mile, closed-circuit network of autonomous shuttles vying to connect Pittsburg, Antioch, Brentwood and Oakley via compact driverless cars.

The \$450 million project will connect riders to the BART's Antioch Station and other central hubs in the four east county cities using wheelchair-accessible shuttles that seat up to four people. Riders will be able to hail a shuttle at a predetermined stop through an app.

“You get your own personal space to go from point A to point B,” said Gokul Hemmady, CEO of Glydways, the company providing the self-driving technology. “It is like ride-hailing, i.e. you never have to wait. You’ll have a predictable journey time all the time so you’re not stuck in traffic or stuck in congestion.”

Contra Costa's fascination with autonomous vehicles shouldn't come as a surprise. The county is home to one of the largest AV testing facilities in the country, the GoMentum Station in Concord, used by companies like Honda and Uber.

The former Concord Naval Weapons Station includes 5,000 acres of private roads for autonomous vehicle testing and offered “a front-row seat” to “a lot of advancement in the technology,” Haile said.

The impact and duration of the county's near-term AV deployments — in Rossmoor and Martinez — is unclear. Both projects got off the ground with the help of federal grants.

Adrian Byram, a Rossmoor resident, is excited about the idea of being part of the autonomous vehicle experiment. Still, he's tempered his expectations of the Rossmoor driverless shuttles.

The shuttles will cover about a half-mile of the Rossmoor community, which spans more than 1½ miles, and will operate a fixed route serving only two stops, according to Byram.

But Byram, 78, is bullish on the technology, and believes it will help neighbors who are no longer able to drive personal vehicles.

“It’s a very big opportunity and a very big necessity because as we get older, you can’t drive as well, and eventually it comes to a point where you can’t drive at all,” Byram said. “We need to find a way of enabling people who do not have access to a car because of mobility or sight problems to allow them to actually still live in an independent way and get around town in a convenient manner, and this is one step toward that.”

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