



November 10, 2021

Director Steven Cliff  
Acting Administrator  
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration  
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE  
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Acting Administrator Steven Cliff:

We write today to congratulate you on your recent nomination as permanent Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. As you prepare for your confirmation hearing, we urge you to support innovation within the autonomous vehicle (AV) sector that will provide a future with increased accessibility, mobility, and safety for all Americans.

### **AVs Will Reduce Traffic Fatalities, Expand Access to Seniors and Disabled, Improve Emissions**

There are many benefits that AVs can provide our society. AVs can provide access to people with disabilities and the elderly. A Bureau of Transportation Statistics survey found that six million people with disabilities lack access to the transportation they need, limiting their ability to find job opportunities and see loved ones.<sup>1</sup> AV companies have the opportunity to make transportation much more accessible from the start by accounting for a number of impairments, including visual and mobility, in their design within all of their fleets.

Additionally, studies forecast that AVs could reduce greenhouse gas emissions from cars and trucks—the biggest source of transportation emissions—by 80 percent.<sup>2</sup> Most AVs will be electric, and many others are hybrids. That's largely because electric vehicle (EV) technology and AV technology complement one another. Electric vehicles are easier for computers to control than traditional vehicles, and combining EV and AV technology maximizes cost and fuel savings. Plus, AVs drive more efficiently than humans can.

Finally, deploying AVs on the road now could save hundreds of thousands of lives over the long term as the technology continues to become more advanced every year.<sup>3</sup> Research shows that 90 percent of car crashes are caused by human error. By eliminating human

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.bts.gov/archive/publications/special\\_reports\\_and\\_issue\\_briefs/issue\\_briefs/number\\_03/entire](https://www.bts.gov/archive/publications/special_reports_and_issue_briefs/issue_briefs/number_03/entire)

<sup>2</sup> <https://e360.yale.edu/features/will-self-driving-cars-usher-in-a-transportation-utopia-or-dystopia>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rand.org/blog/articles/2017/11/why-waiting-for-perfect-autonomous-vehicles-may-cost-lives.html>

error, AVs can make our roads safer. Studies suggest that putting AVs on the road now could save hundreds of thousands of lives over the long term.<sup>4</sup>

### **Public Support for AVs is Strong**

The time is now to support robust AV deployment. In fact, a survey commissioned this fall by Chamber of Progress found that there is support for the deployment of AVs.<sup>5</sup>

The survey found that 53% of voters are ready to increase autonomous vehicle testing and deployment, and 53% are ready to ride in an AV either now or in the next five years. A larger majority of those surveyed (63%) believe there are major benefits to AVs including accessibility and independence for non-drivers, including wheelchair users, the blind, seniors, and those living in transportation deserts. More importantly, three quarters (75%) of labor union members polled supported AVs being tested in their state.

### **Do Not Conflate Autonomous Vehicles with Driver Assistance Systems**

Finally, we urge NHTSA not to conflate advanced driver assistance systems (ADAS) with fully autonomous vehicles.

NHTSA places vehicles on a six-level spectrum of autonomous capabilities. When consumers think about fully self-driving cars, they imagine vehicles where they can take their eyes off the road, talk with loved ones, or even meditate. By NHTSA's standards, those are Level 4 or Level 5 vehicles.

Recently, news reports have focused on accidents involving Tesla-made vehicles where drivers took their eyes off the road because they believed they were in a self-driving car. The fact is, Tesla's vehicles require constant driver engagement and therefore cannot be considered self-driving under NHTSA's Level 4 and 5 standards.<sup>6</sup> By NHTSA's own standards, Tesla's "Full Self Driving" mode is likely Level 2, requiring fully attentive drivers, who keep their hands on the wheel and are prepared to take over at all times.

Leading AV companies pursuing Level 4 autonomy recognized early on that drivers trusted the technology beyond its capabilities if they were asked to monitor an automated system.

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<https://www.rand.org/blog/articles/2017/11/why-waiting-for-perfect-autonomous-vehicles-may-cost-lives.html>

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<https://progresschamber.org/morning-consult-poll-dems-biden-voters-union-members-support-autonomous-vehicles/>

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<https://medium.com/chamber-of-progress/teslas-cars-are-beautiful-but-they-aren-t-actually-self-driving-8170124417ab>

As a result, these companies abandoned the semi-autonomous approach pursued by Tesla today.<sup>7</sup>

We share NHTSA's concerns when it comes to driver education and public safety. Tesla's vehicles are linked to many alarming stories.<sup>8</sup> However, we disagree when that criticism draws in the AV industry writ large and companies that are actually developing true autonomous vehicles.

While NHTSA's demand for accountability from all vehicle manufacturers in this space is appropriate, your agency's policymaking in this area should recognize the varied approaches taken by different manufacturers in this space -- those that are working towards actual autonomy and those that rely on driver assistance.

In fact, one way for NHTSA to address the concerns that arise from monitored Level 2 and 3 systems like Tesla's "Full Self Driving" mode is to encourage the development of fully autonomous Level 4 and 5 vehicles. One step towards this outcome is to finalize and publish the Occupant Protection Final Rule which will allow for the safe deployment of real AVs and bring their benefits to communities across the country sooner.<sup>9</sup>

The benefits of AV deployment should not be delayed. The substantial positive impacts to our communities and climate that AVs can bring are long overdue. We look forward to working with you in your new role. Thank you for all your work on this issue.

Sincerely,



Koustubh "K.J." Bagchi  
Senior Director, Federal Public Policy

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theverge.com/22708676/waymo-tekedra-mawakana-self-driving-interview>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/18/business/tesla-fatal-crash-texas.html>

<sup>9</sup>

[http://progresschamber.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Letter-to-DOT\\_AV-Occupant-Protection-Rule.pdf](http://progresschamber.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Letter-to-DOT_AV-Occupant-Protection-Rule.pdf)