

Autonomous vehicle legislation brought to City Council

Written by By Molly Adamson Sun Correspondent
Friday, 12 March 2021 03:06

‘We have to be ready or they’ll pass us by’

Autonomous cars are becoming more popular thanks to people like Elon Musk and Tesla and the other car companies that will soon be competing with him in the field. In order to prepare for this future, more states are creating legislation addressing the subject of self-driving vehicles.

Michael Sage, the deputy director of the Economic Development Corporation, has been a leading force on this front in McKinley County. On March 2 he presented two bills – New Mexico House Bill 270 and New Mexico Senate Bill 133 - that would bring legislation to bring autonomous vehicles to Gallup in a special city council meeting on March 2. He also presented to the board of commissioners earlier that day.

City Manager Maryann Ustick helped Sage present the bills to the city council. Starting with Bill 270, Ustick and Sage explained that the bill would get New Mexico in line with other states when it comes to autonomous cars. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has placed guidelines for state and local government policies regarding the new technology.

“I think the major concern is that if you have different laws in every state that aren’t consistent, that would not allow autonomous vehicles to travel between states, which is important,” Ustick said. She also expressed concern about the vehicles not being able to be sold in every state.

She went on to explain that either the New Mexico Department of Transportation or the state police would have to work with the private companies like Tesla that make the vehicles. They would need access to data in case of a crash, for example. The public sector would need to be aware of where these vehicles are during the testing and after.

Sage shared a NMDOT study done a few years ago showing that Gallup was a good location for autonomous vehicle testing. He said it was a good location because of its proximity to Silicon Valley, because of its transportation networks, and because of its abundant amount of sunshine.

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Councilor Fran Palochak, Dist. 4, who was stepping in for Mayor Louis Bonagiudi as mayor pro tempore, had one comment. “Autonomous vehicles are here, and we either have to step up and be ready or they’re going to pass Gallup by,” she said.

Before Sage went into detail about the second bill, the city council voted unanimously to pass the resolution to endorse Bill 270.

New Mexico Senate Bill 133 creates a new aviation grant program within the NMDOT to support air service to rural parts of the state. The program awards grants to municipal or county governments to be used to provide air service operators a minimum revenue guarantee for new air service routes. The revenue will subsidize air carriers and be available for counties that have an existing airport or are building a new one.

Gallup would be eligible for a 10 percent grant match because of the airport closure a decade ago. The city could get as much as \$1.75 million in grant money. Dist. 3 Councilor Yogash Kumar asked Ustick and Sage where the city would get the money for the grant match.

Ustick said they could possibly use the lodgers’ tax, which is a tax that is paid by anyone using commercial lodging accommodations. That funding source has declined due to COVID-19, Ustick noted.

“What [SB33] does is provide other funds. This is a \$9 million allocation proposed by this bill that would provide general fund money from the state to actually subsidize air carriers,” Ustick said. “So it would enable us to not use [the] lodgers’ tax.”

Sage and Ustick both suggested the airport project could be a big boost for the economy and redevelopment for the west side of Gallup. Sage said he sees both bills as tools to diversify Gallup’s economy by putting a focus on manufacturing.

The council unanimously voted to approve the resolution to endorse the new program.

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