

Self-driving cars could bring Gallup jobs

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



Gallup Municipal Airport could reopen as a vehicle testing hub

Self-driving cars may soon be coming to Gallup. Autonomous cars were on the agenda for the March 2 McKinley County Commission meeting.

Michael Sage, the deputy director of the Gallup Economic Development Corporation, made a presentation about autonomous cars. He talked about self-driving vehicles being tested in Gallup. He also mentioned the possibility of reopening the Gallup Municipal Airport to air passenger service and using it as a mobility hub for autonomous vehicle testing.

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Tesla came to the EDC in 2013 thinking that Gallup would be a great strategic location for testing autonomous cars, because of its proximity to the railroad and I-40.

The company, the EDC, and the City of Gallup developed the idea of a mobility hub — a center for the testing to happen. Sage said the hub would be located at the Gallup Municipal Airport.

The EDC supports this recommendation because it could lead to manufacturing jobs and a boost to the local economy, Sage explained. The proposed bill would give the autonomous vehicle industry structure, so when companies want to get involved, they would know what to expect.

"There's a real necessity to diversify the local economy, so by embracing our strategic location, our assets, building on those assets to create a new industry, it is our hope that by this legislation, we would then position the City of Gallup to be an area where we can have research and testing," Sage said.

"Once we get research and testing, that means investment, that means new opportunities, and also down the road, that brings the possibility of manufacturing."

Sage then moved on to the Economic Development Administration planning grant that the EDC wants to use to repurpose the Gallup Municipal Airport and bring back air passenger service. It has been a decade since the airport had passenger service.

He mentioned that many health care workers and patients who had COVID-19 often had to drive long distances, and that wouldn't be happening if the airport was open.

"We see the return of air passengers as our response to COVID-19 to build community, to bring in health care professionals, and to get our most vulnerable populations to the healthcare they need," Sage said. "But also, like I said, it supports economic development."

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Sage's presentation mentioned job opportunities that these two resolutions could bring to the area.

Commissioner Robert Baca expressed some doubts about the reality of how many jobs would actually be added to the economy and when that would happen.

He said that he'd been told that these jobs would take five years to come to Gallup, but that it has already been three since he had this conversation with the EDC.

"I say if the commissioners vote to approve this, we ... hold their feet to the fire, because at this point right now, these are words I've heard over and over again [but I haven't seen any results yet]," Baca said.

Dist. 2 Commissioner Genevieve Jackson agreed with Baca when it came to the unkept promise of incoming jobs, and she had some advice for Sage. "Don't say we'll have jobs. Say instead that we're bringing jobs, and give us the time frame," she stated. "Otherwise, we walk away with high expectations, and if it doesn't come to fruition, we're disappointed."

In response to the commissioners' criticisms, Sage suggested that maybe his upbeat outlook confused them. "As a certified economic developer, I'm in the trenches every day, so if I come across as optimistic, or if I'm sounding too joyous, then maybe that's on me," Sage said.

"But for me, I see the glass as half full. I don't see the glass as half empty. When I look at Gallup, I see opportunities," he said.

In regard to jobs, Sage tried to reassure the commissioners that they were coming, but he didn't give any specific numbers. "The jobs may not be in great number[s], but the jobs are being saved, and we're creating that infrastructure that is going to create more opportunity."

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The board passed both of Sage's resolutions, stipulating that the EDC would be required to provide updates. Jackson specifically asked for a timeline.

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