



Nebraska's look to the future

State law on autonomous vehicles reflects the promise this technology holds for making roads safer, improving mobility and benefiting agriculture

by Nebraska Sen. Anna Wishart (awishart@leg.ne.gov)

For several years, I have been following the advancement of autonomous vehicles, reading books and blog posts by economists about the future benefits and problems associated with this technological breakthrough.

While these discussions have been occurring online and in the private sector, very few legislators in my state had been spending time talking about it.

As a senator whose top strength is “futurist” according to the Gallup Clifton Strengths Assessment tool (if you are reading this and have not taken this strengths test, you should), I have a responsibility to push my legislative colleagues to address emerging technologies to make sure that our state laws allow for free market innovation while still maintaining public health and safety.

That is why I embarked on introducing autonomous-vehicle legislation.

A technology of ‘limitless potential’

When LB 989 was originally introduced, it was meant to allow for the testing of autonomous vehicles by cities, and specifically to enable Nebraska’s capital city of Lincoln to pilot an on-demand autonomous shuttle project.

My home city was named one of 35 “Champion Cities” competing for \$5 million in start-up funding from the Bloomberg Foundation for this on-demand autonomous shuttle project.

When I first heard the news of this opportunity for Lincoln, I was beyond excited and wanted to know what I could do to help. In our office’s research, we learned that Nebraska’s laws were essentially silent on autonomous-vehicle technology.

So I decided to introduce LB 989 in January so that we could ensure that any testing of this technology would be done in a safe and regulated environment.

What happened over the next few months — through committee hearings, stakeholder meetings, research and floor debate with my colleagues — completely changed how I viewed autonomous-vehicle technology and its limitless potential. It is full of promise in the areas of safety, mobility, efficiency, agriculture, commerce, environmentalism and economic development.

Safety was my top priority in trying to introduce this technology to our state.

An estimated 94 percent of traffic accidents are caused by human error, and at a time when vehicular crashes are on the rise, autonomous-vehicle technology shows great potential in preventing injury, saving lives and reducing the cost of traffic accidents.

Autonomous vehicles also will have a huge positive impact for people who are unable to drive, giving them greater mobility and all that comes with it: access to good jobs, quality health care and education, for example. Technological advances in

Key provisions in Nebraska’s new law on autonomous vehicles (LB 989)

- ✓ Authorizes the use of automated driving systems and driverless-capable vehicles if they comply with state traffic and safety laws
- ✓ Requires a conventional driver, if present in the vehicle, to have a license and to manually operate the vehicle if instructed to do so by the automated driving system
- ✓ Allows automated vehicles to be used for ride sharing and public transportation



Nebraska’s regulatory framework for autonomous vehicles is one of the most innovative and business friendly in the country.

these vehicles also will allow for more flexibility among local public transportation systems and their users.

Nebraska is a predominantly rural state, and farming as we know it is expected to be revolutionized by autonomous vehicles.

We will see an emergence of self-driving tractors, self-propelled implements such as sprayers in row crops, and advanced automated technology for major farm activities such as fertilizer application, planting and irrigation. These automated technologies are predicted to become a \$250 billion industry for agriculture suppliers and manufacturers. As one example, small, automated tractor equipment will be a \$45 billion market on its own.

Not an easy road to legislative passage

While my original bill, LB 989, dealt strictly with the testing of autonomous-vehicle technology, I quickly decided to think bigger when one of my colleagues, Sen. Tyson Larson, introduced a similar but broader piece of legislation.

Combining our efforts, we proposed a measure that would make Nebraska’s regulatory framework one of the most innovative and business friendly in the country.

My partnership with Sen. Larson was an example of true bipartisanship — me, a Democrat from an urban district working closely with him, a Republican from a rural district.

Our team also included the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, Tesla, Uber, the Nebraska Department of Transportation and a bipartisan group of legislative colleagues.

While we had great support from industry and a select group of senators, we were met with opposition from several colleagues concerned that our legislation was too advanced.

Those concerns resulted in a lengthy filibuster of my bill. This opposition required me, as a freshman senator, to remove my legislative “training wheels.” I withstood three rounds of debate on the legislation, and with the partnership of Sen. Larson, we were able to gain enough votes in our body to overcome a filibuster and advance our bill to the governor’s desk in April of this year.

A month later, we celebrated with a signing ceremony with our governor that included riding in an autonomous shuttle, similar to the one we hope to bring to my district in downtown Lincoln.

As elected officials, we spend a majority of our time reacting to current problems, or debating past issues that will never be put to bed. We spend far too little time talking about the future.

Working on this piece of legislation has inspired me to continue pushing myself and my colleagues to look to the future. We will continue to address advancing technologies and examine our existing state statutes in a way that enables innovation while maintaining health and safety.

Nebraska Sen. Anna Wishart was elected to the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature in 2016. She represents a part of the capital city of Lincoln.

Submissions welcome

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