

# Opportunity for autonomy

## Self-driving vehicles could deliver independence

By TONY LEYS

KFF Health News  
Indiana Capital Chronicle

GRAND RAPIDS, Minn. — Myrna Peterson predicts self-driving vehicles will be a ticket out of isolation and loneliness for people like her, who live outside big cities and have disabilities that prevent them from driving.

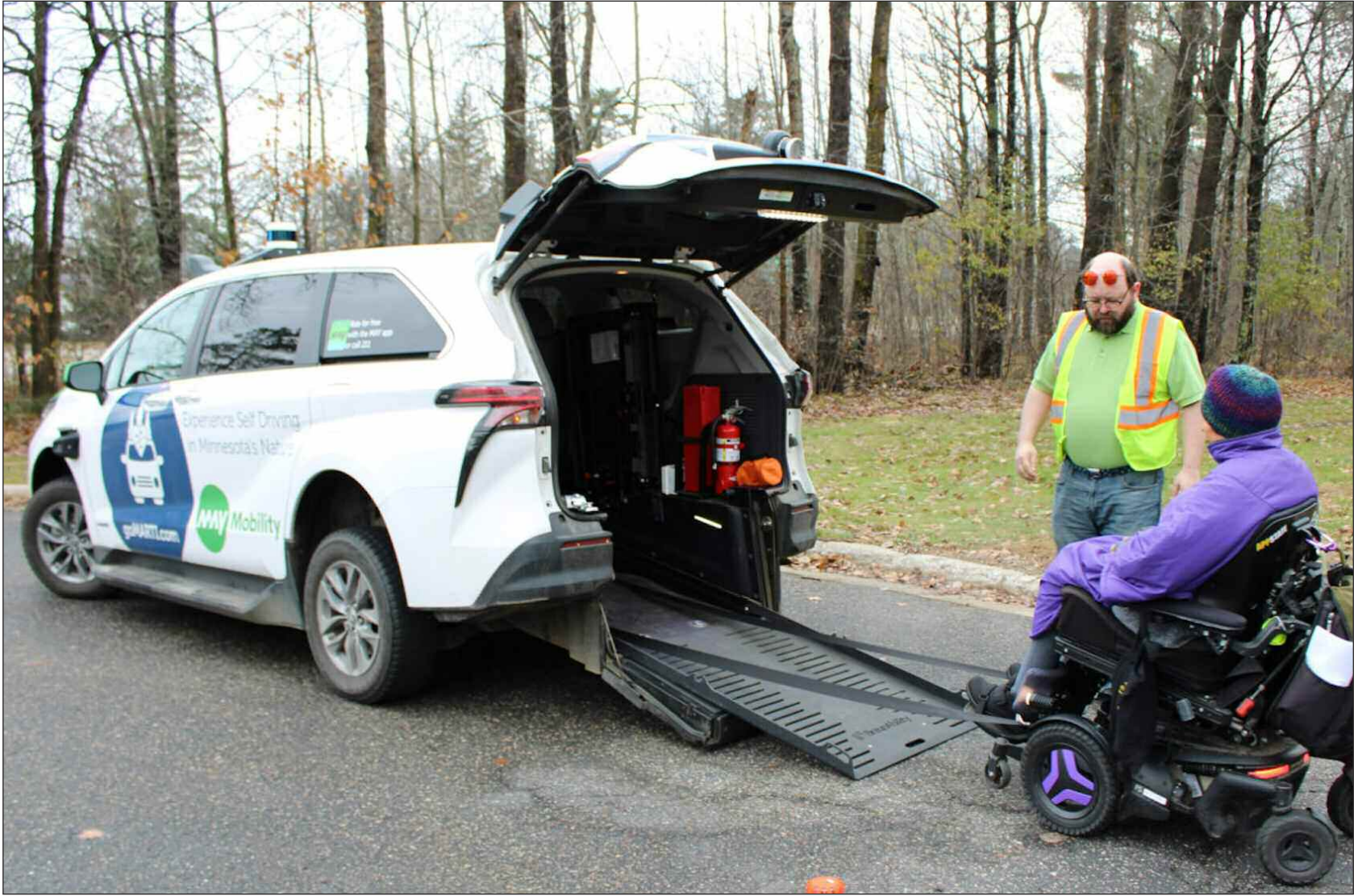
Peterson, who has quadriplegia, is an enthusiastic participant in an unusual test of autonomous vehicles in this corner of northern Minnesota. She helped attract government funding to bring five self-driving vans to Grand Rapids, a city of 11,000 people in a region of pine and birch forests along the Mississippi River.

The project's self-driving vans always have a human operator in the driver's seat, poised to take over in complicated situations. But the computers are in control about 90% of the time, and they've given 5,000 rides since 2022 without any accidents, organizers say.

"It's been fun. I'm really sold on it," said Peterson, who used to rely on her power wheelchair to travel around town, even in winter.

Autonomous vehicles, which can drive themselves at least part of the time, are making news in urban areas, such as San Francisco, where extensive tests of the technology are underway.

Rural experiments have been set up in a few other



Indiana Capital Chronicle/KFF Health News/Tony Leys

Myrna Peterson (right) rolls her wheelchair into a goMARTI van as operator Mark Haase watches. During rides, Haase sits in the driver's seat, ready to take over from the van's computer at a moment's notice.

states, including Iowa and Ohio. Peterson hopes the pilot projects help bring a day when fully autonomous cars and vans assist the estimated 25 million Americans whose

travel is limited by disabilities. Fully independent vehicles remain far from everyday options, as tech companies and automakers struggle to perfect the

technology. Recently, for example, General Motors recalled all its self-driving cars after one struck and dragged a pedestrian who had been hit by another vehicle.

But Waymo, a corporate relative of Google, is forging ahead with fully autonomous taxi rides in multiple cities. Peterson is among those who believe autonomous

vehicles someday will become safer than human-driven models. "Look at how many times the light bulb failed before it worked," she said. See **Autonomy** page 2B

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# New Explorer targeted at millennials

By BREANA NOBLE

The Detroit News  
Tribune News Service

DEARBORN, Mich. — The refreshed 2025 Ford Explorer seeks to attract millennial buyers with more capability, hands-free highway BlueCruise driving and a variant of Ford's new digital experience, though customers won't be able to get it as a hybrid.

Younger families — and the largest generation since the Baby Boomers — are demanding more from their vehicles than the occasional road trip, according to Ford Motor Co., wanting to stay connected and kick up the adventure. The new models of the Dearborn automaker's best-selling SUV, last redesigned for 2020, feature an updated interior, more advanced technology and more standard features to better suit their needs.

"When we look at our capable and rugged Explorer, we know that it really appeals to those with an adventurous spirit, customers that want the confidence and the capability that they're looking for, whether it's taking their kids to hockey practice or getting off the grid going camping," Trevor Scott, Ford's general manager of family vehicles, said during a product briefing. See **Targeted** page 3B



Tribune News Service/Ford

Ford is targeting its 2024 Explorer at millennials. Younger families — and the largest generation since the Baby Boomers — are demanding more from their vehicles than the occasional road trip, according to Ford Motor Co., wanting to stay connected and kick up the adventure.



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## Autonomy ...

Continued from page 1B  
 Unlike many smaller towns, Grand Rapids has public buses and a taxi service. But Peterson said those options don't always work well, especially for people with disabilities. The autonomous vehicle program, known as goMARTI, which stands for Minnesota's Autonomous Rural Transit Initiative, offers a flexible alternative, she said. She hopes it eventually will ease a national shortage of drivers, which tends to be especially acute in rural regions.

The project is funded through the spring of 2027 with more than \$13 million from federal, state, and local sources, much of it coming from the 2021 federal infrastructure bill.

The project's distinctive Toyota minivans are outfitted by a Michigan company, May Mobility, which is backed by the

Japanese auto giant and other investors. Slogans painted on the side invite the public to "Experience Self Driving in Minnesota's Nature." The vans bristle with technology, including cameras, radar, GPS, and laser sensors. Their computer systems constantly monitor surroundings and learn from situations they encounter, said Jon Dege, who helps manage the project for May Mobility.

Users arrange free rides via a smartphone app or the 211 social service telephone line.

On a recent chilly afternoon, a goMARTI van pulled up near Peterson's house. She soon emerged, bundled in a bright purple parka honoring her beloved Minnesota Vikings football team.

See **Autonomy** page 4B

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# Auto show is moving back to January

By MATT DURR  
mlive.com  
Tribune News Service

DETROIT — Organizers of the North American International Auto Show are hitting the brakes on the 2024 show and throwing plans in reverse so to speak. After two years of running the show in September,

officials have confirmed the show will return to a January timeframe starting with the 2025 NAIAS, according to the Associated Press.

“In a constantly changing global automotive landscape, this update reflects our efforts to continue to reimagine the Detroit auto show with keeping

an eye on what matters most — getting people excited about cars,” said Rod Alberts, executive director of the NAIAS in a statement.

The 2025 show will run from Jan. 10 — 20 according to organizers.

After taking place in January for many years, the event

shifted to the summer months as part of an effort to attract more people to the show and to do more outdoor events surrounding the showcase. The first summer show was scheduled for June 2020, however the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in both the 2020 and 2021 shows being canceled.

The show returned in September 2022, but with far fewer planned events than what were scheduled for the 2020 show.

By moving the show back to January, officials hope attendance improves and more automakers will once again debut new cars at the show.

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## Targeted ...

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“We want our Explorer customers to know that not only do they have the style, but they have the capability and the versatility that they’re looking for, for their whole family.”

Orders for the three-row SUV with options for six or seven passengers opened on Thursday with a starting manufacturer’s suggestion retail price of \$41,220, including destination and delivery charges. The Chicago-assembled vehicles will begin arriving at dealerships in the second quarter.

Despite Ford’s efforts to emphasize hybrid powertrains amid slower-than-expected growth in electric vehicle sales, the company last year said it was dropping its hybrid option from the Explorer lineup. It’s not counter to the automaker’s ambitions, Ford says, but it’s part of efforts to prioritize hybrids for the Ford Police Interceptor Utility vehicles based on the Explorer, which are in demand because of lower operating costs, and vehicles where hybrids have been popular with customers like the F-150 full-size truck and Maverick small pickup.

“It is clear that our first responders value the hybrid more than at retail, and so that’s why we’re biased towards them,” said Kelley Clark, Explorer’s chief program engineer. “It’s more about simplification of the offering in terms of what customers tend to check the boxes. They weren’t checking the hybrid box on the retail. That’s why we offered so many things standard, trying to make the build process, manufacturing, everything simpler, because that’s the right way to do things as you try to ramp up production on such a high-volume unit.”

The number of vehicle combinations has been reduced by approximately 95% — from hundreds to less than 42 as Ford seeks to improve quality and ease the buying process. The 5,000-pound Class III Trailer Tow Package, for example, now comes standard on all models alongside blind-spot detection, adaptive cruise control, automatic emergency braking, seven drive modes and more. The simplification eliminates about 1,300 parts, reducing sequencing needs and increasing the likelihood of vehicles being built correctly the first time.

“The Explorer is built on a solid foundation already,” Clark said. “Our customers love performance, they look to capability, that safety and they love the package space. We’re not going to change that. One thing we are changing is giving them more features standard. ... These are the features that our customers have said they love. These are the features our customers said they use. These are the features that our customers want.”

The 2025 Explorer is available with the 2.3-liter four cylinder Ecoboost or the 3-liter Ecoboost V-6 engines, which accounted for a majority of the nearly 187,000 U.S. Explorer sales last year. The more powerful Explorer ST comes standard with the 3-liter Ecoboost engine, which produces 400 horsepower and 415 pound-feet of torque with standard rear-wheel drive. Four-wheel drive is available.

The Explorer hybrid wasn’t especially fuel effi-

cient for retail customers, said Sam Abuelsamid, principal e-mobility analyst at market research firm Guidehouse Inc.

“For police use, they spend a lot of time idling. Hybrids make a lot more sense for them,” he said. “For regular road users, there’s some boost in fuel economy, but it wasn’t huge given the cost.”

A lack of a hybrid propulsion system doesn’t make the refreshed Explorer less technologically advanced, though. For the first time, Explorer drivers for the ST-Line, ST and Platinum trims will have access to BlueCruise. It isn’t available on Active models. ST-Line is expected to be the most popular model followed by Active and then ST, which alone accounts for about 20% of sales.

“At the click of a button, BlueCruise allows you to take your hands off the wheel, your feet off the pedals and manages steering, acceleration and braking, all while keeping you positioned in your lane and a safe distance from the driver in front of you,” BlueCruise General Manager Ashley Lambrix said. “It takes the work out of driving — not fun — and it makes driving less stressful and more enjoyable, whether I’m on a long road trip with my family, whether I’m driving to soccer tournaments on the weekends, which is something we do a lot in my household, or as part of my everyday commute, and this is really what makes it such a perfect complement to the 2025 Explorer.”

The BlueCruise 1.2 software is updateable and available at purchase for a \$700 one-year activation. Customers who pass will receive a 90-day complimentary trial, after which they can subscribe for the current \$800 per year or \$75 per month. Ford didn’t have a take-up rate, as launches of BlueCruise on the Mustang Mach-E SUV and F-150 trucks had a three-year option with the first of those just ending.

“Part of the reason that we have the flexible subscription offering is to allow customers to use BlueCruise in a way that fits their lifestyle,” Lambrix said. “So, I think a use case for a monthly subscription is like, ‘Hey, it’s road-trip season in the summer. I’d like to buy for a couple months during the summer.’ But time will tell as we see those first customers coming off with a 90-day trial.”

Explorer also is the first Ford vehicle to debut the company’s new digital experience. It doesn’t have the panoramic screen or directional pad steering wheel as seen on the Lincoln Nautilus, but a traditional 12.3-inch digital cluster.

The Android platform-based system, however, still is five times faster than Sync 4, has the cloud-connected Google Assistant voice activation technology with the option for Amazon’s Alexa Built-in, and features a 13.2-inch infotainment screen with access to an assortment of apps for audio as well as visual media when the vehicle is stationary, including the Ford-exclusive Asphalt Nitro 2 racing game. The new system also supports Android Auto and Apple CarPlay smartphone projection.

“The SUV market is just saturated,” said Karl Brauer, executive analyst at auto information website iSeeCars.com.

“Automakers have to be at the top of their game. The Explorer is a good example: Is it a capable, well-recognized, competitive vehicle? Yeah, but that alone probably is not good enough. It’s got to be cutting-edge and leading the segment. Those systems and those elements are starting to replace formerly important characteristics, for instance, having enough horsepower, good light quality and seat comfort. They can’t wait for a redesign to make it really appealing in the market.”

Designers pushed forward the dashboard to give front-row passengers a more spacious cabin. An integrated tray below the touchscreen houses an available wireless phone charging pad. Otherwise there are USB connections. Ambient lighting is standard or available on upper trims, and the great American outdoors inspired new color schemes and more premium interior options, said Michele De Demo, lead for color and materials.

Added Paul Mutter, lead interior designer: “Our main design philosophy going into the Explorer was trying to bring more of a warm, inviting and home-like atmosphere to the interior, bringing in the premium materials, mixing different materials and all these things that we do in our home and creating that more comfortable environment like your living room. With Explorer being such a family car, we feel like that metaphor really ties in nicely and gives our customers what they’re looking for.”

Abuelsamid, the analyst, said the updated interior options and the larger touchscreen make the vehicle more upscale: “It feels a lot more premium than it did before. Previously, the Explorer was not inexpensive, but for the price, it still had some hard plastics.”

On the outside, the Explorer gets a larger grille with a different pattern for each trim, sleeker LED headlamps, a front skid plate and lower, wider air curtains that give the vehicle a lower appearance. A new back-painted roof option is available for ST-Line and above. Wheels come available up to 21 inches, and there’s a new Vapor Blue Metallic paint color.

The 2025 models also open ST-Line customers to attend Ford Performance Racing School’s ST Driving Experience at no additional cost. The lesson seeks to provide customers a look at what they can get out of their Explorer. Customers can select the location of their choice in Park City, Utah, or Asheville, North Carolina.

It’s an education tool and a part of expanding the Ford vehicle community, said Andrew Staley, Explorer’s brand manager. In the past, 10% of ST customers have taken advantage of the opportunity. Ford covers lodging and the experience is done in a loaned vehicle, so customers don’t have to worry about overdoing their own.

“They get to hone their driving skills,” Staley said, “through scenic mountain drives, through skills courses, even a timed autocross challenge, so a lot of cool things, a lot of great experiences for our customers, in addition to all of the standard equipment, the features and options that they’re already getting.”

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# Autonomy ...

Continued from page 2B  
She rolled her electric wheelchair to the van, up a ramp, and into the back. Van operator Mark Haase helped strap the wheelchair in, then climbed into the driver's seat for a demonstration.  
As the van pulled onto the street, the steering wheel

seemed to shudder, reflecting tiny adjustments the computer made.  
Haase kept his foot poised near the brake pedal and his hands cupped around the steering wheel, ready to take over if a complication came up. After moments when he needed to take control of the vehicle, he

pressed a button telling the computer system to resume command. "It was weird at first, but it didn't take long to get used to it and trust the system," Haase said.  
The Minnesota Department of Transportation helped direct federal money toward the Grand Rapids project,

which followed a similar effort in the southern Minnesota city of Rochester. Tara Olds, the department's director of connected and automated vehicles, said her agency sought smaller communities that wanted to give autonomous vehicles a shot.  
Neither kind of driver will

ever be perfect, Olds said. "You know, humans make mistakes, and computers make mistakes," she said. But the public would understandably react differently if a fatal crash were caused by an autonomous vehicle instead of a human, she said.  
See **Autonomy** page 6B



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Tribune News Services/The Dallas Morning News/Tom Fox

Assembly team worker Jalon Hogan uses a machine to move a rear door to a large SUV at General Motors Arlington Assembly plant in Arlington, Texas. The company recently announced a \$500 million investment in the plant to prepare for next-generation combustion engine vehicles.

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# Tesla tops list the of made-in-America

By **SASHA RICHIE**  
The Dallas Morning News  
Tribune News Service

Picture the most American car. Maybe you see a 1950s-era Chevy Bel Air. For more modern sensibilities, it might be a Ford F-150 or Mustang or a Jeep Wrangler.

But you'd be wrong, according to Cars.com's annual ranking of the most American-made cars.

No cars made by the Big Three — General Motors, Ford and Stellantis (Chrysler) — even made the top 15. You'd have to look even further down the list for their most recognizable models.

However, if you pictured a Tesla, more specifically a Model Y, you'd be correct, and you probably keep up with the latest tech news. If you visualized a Honda Passport, which took the fifth spot after four Tesla models, well, you're probably lying.

If you're confused, don't worry. What constitutes an American-made car is a lot more complicated than the logo on its badge and the number of American flags in its commercials. So here's everything you need to know about 2023's most American-made cars.

### Tesla sweeps

Tesla produces four models, and all four ranked at the top for American-made-ness. At the very top is Tesla's Model Y SUV. While other Tesla plants around the world make Model Ys, if you buy one in the U.S., it was assembled at either the automaker's original Fremont, California, factory or its new Gigafactory Texas headquarters in Austin.

The same goes for Tesla's other models. Any Model 3, Model X and Model S — the next three in the ranking — bought stateside was assembled in Fremont, with some batteries coming from Tesla's Nevada facility.

This is in line with Cars.com's basic criteria. Final assembly location and U.S. manufacturing workforce are the most

important factors. The ranking also considers percentage of U.S.- and Canadian-made parts (a quirk of available data from federally mandated reporting), as well as where a car's engine and transmission (and/or battery when relevant) came from.

A few things can disqualify a car from making the ranking, primarily related to the availability of manufacturing information. The list only ranks commercially available light-weight vehicles. Some recognizable American nameplates like Rivian's Illinois-made electric trucks and the GMC Hummer EV were left off the list because they exceed the 8,500-lb. light-duty weight limit.

Heavy vehicles like that don't have to report their percentage of North American parts, so Cars.com can't rank them alongside vehicles that do. Models that don't meet minimum sales, inventory and production thresholds also don't make the cut.

### The top 10

These criteria are why Honda, headquartered in Tokyo, can put five vehicles in the top 10, including two from its luxury subsidiary Acura. Honda's Passport SUV, Odyssey minivan and Ridgeline pickup were ranked, fifth, seventh and ninth, respectively. Acura's MDX and RDX SUVs ranked eighth and tenth. The Honda entries are all assembled in Lin-

coln, Alabama, while Acura's are assembled at plants in Ohio.

Since Cars.com began its American-made index in 2020, Honda has always placed many models toward the top. This is because, though Honda imports some vehicles, 73.1% of its U.S. light-duty sales are assembled domestically. That mark trails only Tesla with 100% and Ford with 77.5%.

The ranking's big surprise is the Volkswagen ID.4 at No. 6. When the vehicle debuted in the U.S., for the 2021 model year, it was made in Germany, unsurprising for a German brand. However, ID.4s sold in the U.S. are now assembled in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The electric SUV also got a boost from the ranking's domestic parts criterion. The ID.4 is available in eight trims, some of which are up to 75% domestic-made parts, with all power-trains being sourced in the U.S.

This is reflective of a trend in EVs shifting toward American production. Fourteen EVs made the top 60. EVs in total made up 22% of the list, despite only representing 7% of new vehicle registrations in Q1 2023. This is likely due to new stipulations from 2022's Inflation Reduction Act. The bill requires that a certain percentage of an EV battery's components be sourced in the U.S., in order for the vehicle to be eligible for the EV tax credit.

# Show ...

Continued from page 3B  
While official attendance figures were not released for the 2022 and 2023 shows, the AP reports previous January events drew around 800,000 attendees. For comparison, officials previously stated they would be happy with 500,000 attendees for the 2022 show.  
Auto shows in general are struggling

to bring in guests and to attract automakers to attend.

Auto companies are now electing to hold their own private virtual events to debut new vehicles. Those private reveals are typically less expensive and don't have to compete with other companies who are also debuting new vehicles at the same time.





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# Autonomy ...

Continued from page 4B  
 Frank Douma, a research scholar at the University of Minnesota's Center for Transportation Studies, has analyzed the Grand Rapids project and other autonomous vehicle programs. He said running such projects in smaller towns isn't necessarily harder than doing so in urban areas. "It's just different."

For the foreseeable future, such services probably will need to run on predetermined routes, with regular stops, he said. It would be more complicated to have autonomous vehicles travel on demand to unfamiliar addresses out in the countryside.

Developers will need to overcome significant challenges before autonomous vehicles can become a regular part of rural life, he said. "But it's no longer something that can be dismissed as impossible."

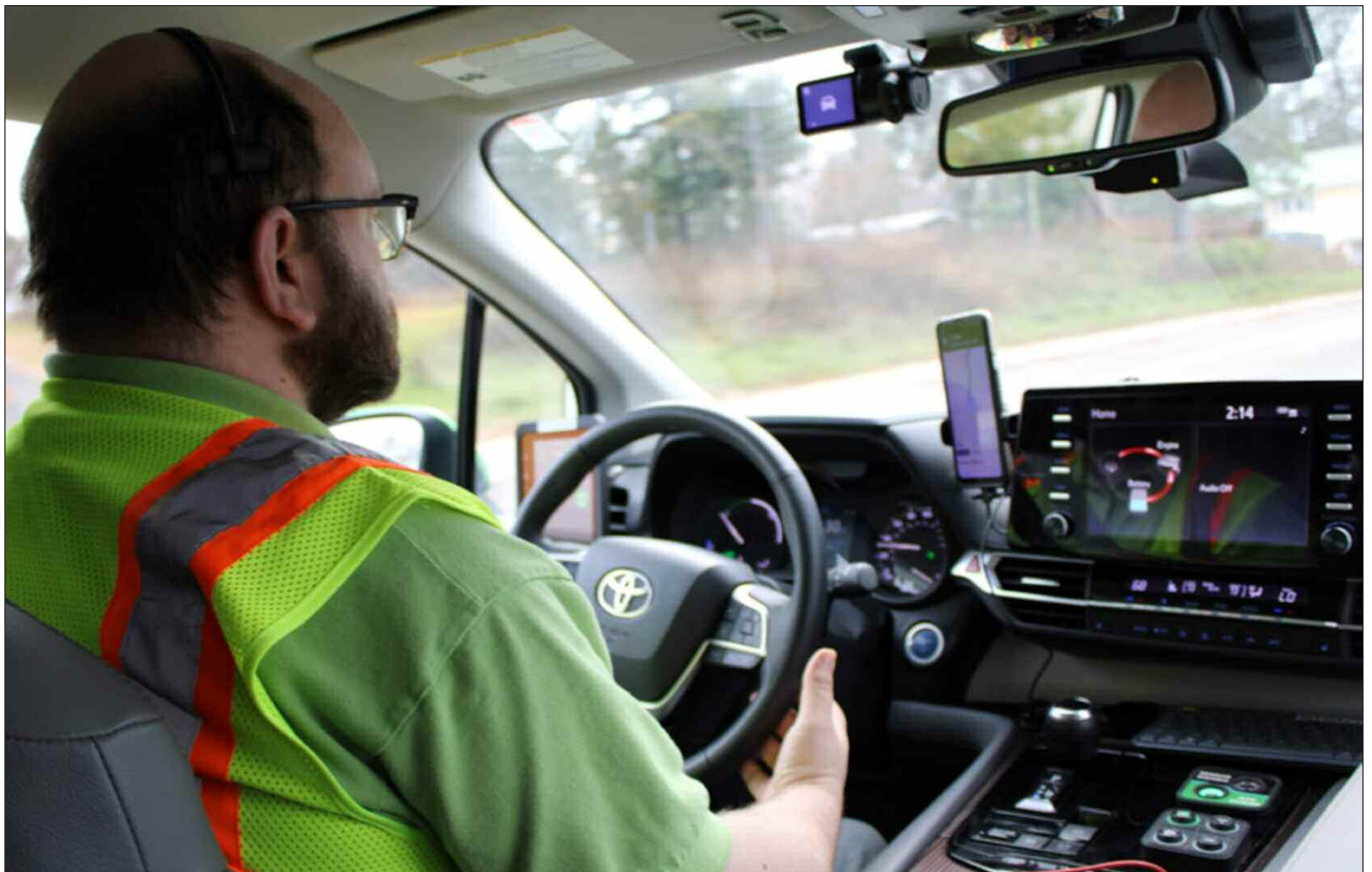
A 2022 report from the National Disability Institute predicted that autonomous vehicles could help many people with disabilities get out of their homes and obtain jobs.

Tom Foley, the group's executive director, said a lack of transportation often causes isolation, which can lead to mental health problems. "There's an epidemic of loneliness, particularly for older people and particularly for people with disabilities," he said.

Foley, who is blind, has tried fully autonomous vehicles in San Francisco. He believes someday they will become a safe and practical alternative to human drivers, including in rural areas. "They don't text. They don't drink. They don't get distracted," he said.

For now, most riders who use wheelchairs need attendants to secure them inside a van before it starts moving. But researchers are looking into ways to automate that task so people who use wheelchairs can take advantage of fully autonomous vehicles.

The Grand Rapids project covers 35 miles of road, with 71 stops. The routes initially



Indiana Capital Chronicle/KFF Health News/Tony Leys

Operator Mark Haase keeps his hands cupped around the steering wheel as a goMARTI van's computer system drives. The project's vans drive themselves about 90% of the time, but operators are always poised to take over in complicated situations.

avoided parking lots, where human drivers often make unexpected decisions, Dege said. But organizers recognized the street-side stops could be challenging for many people, especially if they're among the 10% of goMARTI riders who use wheelchairs. The autonomous vans now drive into some parking lots to pick riders up at the door.

During the recent demonstration ride with Peterson and Haase, the van turned into a clinic parking lot. A lady in an orange car cut across the lot, heading for the front of the van. The computer driving the van hit the brakes. A split second later, Haase did the same. The orange car's driver smiled

and gave a friendly Midwestern wave as she drove past.

The autonomous vans have gone out in nearly all kinds of weather, which can be a challenge in northern Minnesota. Grand Rapids received more than 7 feet of snow last winter.

"There were only three or four times when it was so snowy we had to pull it in," Dege said. The autonomous driving systems can handle snowflakes in the air and ice on the pavement, he said. They tend to get confused by snow piles, however. The human operators step in to assist in those situations while the computers learn how to master them.

The robot drivers can get stymied as well by roundabouts, also known as traffic circles. The setups are touted as safer than four-way stops, but they can befuddle human drivers too.

Haase took control each time the van approached a roundabout. He also took the wheel as the van came up on a man riding a bicycle along the right side of the road. "Better safe than sorry," Haase said. Once the van was a few yards past the bicycle, he pressed a button that told the robot to resume control.

Peterson takes the vans to stores, restaurants, community meetings, hockey games — "and church, of course, every

Sunday and Wednesday," she said.

She said the project has brought Grand Rapids residents together to imagine a more inclusive future. "It's not just a fancy car," she said.

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