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Driverless Vehicles Raise Excitement, Questions

Some day on the not-too-distant horizon, fleets of automated vehicles may be shepherding people to work, shopping and daily activities, while driverless trucks make cross-country treks to deliver the growing amount of freight being created by today's online consumers.

But every new opportunity offered by a coming sea change in how we get around is accompanied by a raft of questions that have no easy answers.

That was the impression a contingent of Lehigh Valley Planning Commission staff and board members came away with after attending the Pennsylvania Automated Vehicle Summit convened by PennDOT in April in Pittsburgh. The two-day event, packed with sessions led by experts in planning, transportation, computer automation, development and freight movement foretold a future that will be transformed by automated vehicles.

Automated vehicles are expected to touch every person, from the daily commuter to the online shopper to people with limited mobility, who suddenly could have access to almost unlimited mobility.

But there are challenges to overcome. Who's responsible for an accident that involves no drivers? How are autonomous vehicles going to navigate the subtle nuances of urban commuting? What's going to happen to the jobs of all those professional drivers? And how does this affect public transit?

One myth that seemed to be squashed at the summit, and again during the National Planning Conference last week in New Orleans, was that the autonomous wave will mean fewer cars will be needed on the roadways.

"There will be more cars, not less," said LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley, who moderated the Freight Movement session in Pittsburgh. "People without mobility now will have it, and some people who choose not to own a car will still be using automated vehicle services. Don't make plans to turn those parking decks into apartments just yet."

The summit drew 400 people April 9-10 – twice the number that attended the first summit in 2017.

Perhaps the biggest question raised during the event was how companies will prevent people from hacking into the intricate computer systems that will control automated vehicles, said LVPC board member Gordon Campbell.

“It’s really important for these manufacturers to put in the proper security so these vehicles can’t be hacked,” Campbell said. “I’m excited about all this, but I’m not confident yet. There are still a lot of unanswered questions.”

Information gathered during the summit in Pittsburgh, and during the National Planning Conference, will be included in the new Regional Comprehensive Plan that is being drafted by the LVPC. The plan is scheduled to be completed in 2019.