

Local BART station celebrates first autonomous vehicle

Test vehicle to solve 'first and last mile' commuter problems

By RYAN J. DEGAN

The Livermore Amador Valley Transit Authority (LAVTA) celebrated the launch of its shared autonomous vehicle test project at the East Dublin/Pleasanton BART station last Friday.

While the current shared autonomous vehicles (SAV) have been put in place to test the technology and practicality of self-driving vehicles, organizers hope the vehicles will help address the "first and last mile" problem that currently keeps many commuters from comfortably accessing rapid transit services.

As the SAV program expands — as project leaders hope it does — the vehicles will be able to take commuters from the BART station to nearby residential areas, bus routes and commercial destinations. The overall goal is to make public transportation as convenient as possible, officials say.

"The results of autonomous vehicle technology will be less congestion, less pollution and greater safety on our roadways," said Karla Brown, a Pleasanton councilwoman and chair of the LAVTA board. "Testing of autonomous vehicles is expected to take two to three years and will be proven by more than 100 different testing scenarios here in the city of Dublin."

Brown said the models are based



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New shared autonomous vehicles (SAV) are being tested at the East Dublin/Pleasanton BART station. The vehicles are 100% electric powered.

off the ones currently being tested in Bishop Ranch in San Ramon, which have a maximum speed of 30 mph but will typically operate at a speed closer to 10-12 mph, and are capable of "communicating" with stop lights.

The one SAV showcased at the event is in the second generation of autonomous vehicles, 100% electric powered, wheelchair accessible and capable of holding 12 people — including an attendant who will remain on the bus during the testing period.

Approximately 70 people attended the celebration, many of whom

were able to join in the vehicle's inaugural test rides.

"Welcome to Dublin, California, the nation's most innovative city regarding transportation. What do you think?" said Dublin Mayor David Haubert, also a LAVTA board member, before taking the first ride. "Here we are on the forefront of innovation for the autonomous vehicle."

A driving force behind the SAV program, officials say, is LAVTA's continued mission to produce easily accessible transit opportunities for Bay Area residents while also supporting environmental

sustainability. According to Scott Haggerty, Alameda County Supervisor and LAVTA vice chair, the positive environmental impact from even the single test vehicle will be significant.

"What's most important (is) the air quality benefits these vehicles are expected to give us," Haggerty said. "They will provide a convenient and reliable first and last mile zero emission service."

According to Haggerty, the 100% electric SAV will help reduce 6,000 single occupancy commuter trips totaling approximately 100,000 miles, resulting in the reduction of more than 60 pounds of smog forming air pollutants and more than 60,000 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions annually.

Project leaders received the support of the state government when local Assemblywoman Catharine Baker (R-San Ramon) advocated for the passage of Assembly Bill 1444, essentially giving LAVTA the blessing of the state to continue with the project.

"Our legislation was just to make sure that the state got out of the way," Baker said.

Existing law permits the operation of an autonomous vehicle on public roads if a driver is seated and capable of taking manual control should the need arise. AB 1444 makes an allowance for LAVTA to

test their vehicles without an official driver, though an attendant will still be on-board during testing — the vehicles, however, lack a steering wheel, brake pedal or accelerator.

"As elected officials we can have all the best ideas in the world but if we don't collaborate, if we don't work together to try to make it happen, we don't see an improvement in quality of life," Baker said. "It is easy being green if you work together to do it."

The SAV program was sponsored by a large collection of organizations from across the state.

In addition to BART and the city of Dublin, LAVTA received support from numerous other Bay Area organizations, including Bay Area Air Quality Management District, Contra Costa County Transportation Authority, County Connection, EasyMile, First Transit and GoMentum Station.

"I want to thank LAVTA for thinking outside of the box for bringing this creative idea to the city of Dublin where we can test and learn and test and learn and make things even better," Haubert said. "Thousands of Dublin residents use the BART station and now it is going to be even more convenient, and Dublin is home to two BART stations so this could be just the beginning." ■