

## How soon before autonomous cars cruise into Miami?

By Nicole Martinez

On a recent trip to Pittsburgh, Miami Beach Commissioner Kristen Rosen Gonzalez was taken aback by the sight of autonomous Uber vehicles zipping around downtown's crammed streets.

"There was still a person on the right-hand side, but the car was driving itself," said Gonzalez, recalling how she wondered if the same technology could work in in her coastal city. "I think self-driving cars are really changing how people live."



*Miami Beach is one of a number of Florida communities eager to bring autonomous vehicle technology to their neighborhoods. | Photo courtesy of Flickr Creative Common*

As soon as she landed in Florida, Gonzalez made a push for Miami Beach to secure a similar pilot program with Uber, joining a growing number of Florida officials eager to bring autonomous vehicle technology to the state. If things go as planned, according to Gonzalez and other insiders, self-driving autos could be maneuvering area streets in as little as 18 months.

And Florida has some edge over other states: It's [one of only eight states](#) to have drafted legislation on autonomous vehicles, and those regulations are among the least restrictive in the country.

The state allows anyone with a valid driver's license to operate an autonomous vehicle. Additionally, a human operating an autonomous vehicle remotely does not have to be inside the car while it is moving. A previous Florida regulation – which mandated that any company wishing to test self-driving cars must submit proof of a \$5 million insurance policy – was eliminated in 2016.

Florida's favorable regulatory environment here, combined with growing public interest in transportation alternatives, has prompted companies like Uber and IBM to zone in on the Miami area,

in particular, for autonomous vehicle pilot programs. In June 2016, IBM announced it would [test-drive](#) Ollie, a 12-person autonomous vehicle designed by Local Motors, in Miami-Dade County, though the cars have yet to hit the road.

Similarly, Uber has set its sights on the Miami metro area as a launch point for its self-driving cars. "Miami-Dade County, in general, is on Uber's list of top five or six places to roll out the autonomous vehicle platform," said Tim Gomez, whose firm [Floridian Partners](#) represents Uber's lobbying efforts in Miami-Dade and Broward counties. "I would suspect there would be some product down here within 18-24 months, whether that's a pilot or the early stages of getting the product on the road."

Gonzalez wants to make sure that Miami Beach is the first city in Miami-Dade County to welcome an autonomous vehicle initiative. "We want to show them a lot of love and ask them to come here first," she said. "If everyone is on board, we will go ahead and roll out a resolution for commissioners to vote on and make it official." If commissioners approve [Gonzalez's request](#), the city would draw up a formal resolution for enticing Uber to bring its test pilot program to Miami Beach.

While many local business and government officials say they're excited about the prospect of driverless vehicles in Miami, not everyone is sold. According to labor expert and author Steven Greenhouse, more than [5 million people](#) make their living from as professional drivers, and autonomous vehicles could put many of them out of work. Legal professionals, meanwhile, maintain that Florida's lax regulations on autonomous vehicles raise a number of red flags.

"The idea that you can operate self-driving cars with absolutely no requirements – no permitting, no insurance - is very troubling," said Ricardo Martinez-Cid, a partner at Miami law firm [Podhurst Orseck](#), which specializes in personal injury liability issues. "If there is an accident, and the company operating the autonomous vehicle is under no obligation to be insured, then the burden would likely fall on the victim's family or to the taxpayers, and it can get messy."

Martinez-Cid adds that a new technology can be made more dangerous when firm regulations are not in place. He points to the aviation industry as a prime example of why regulations are essential when new technologies emerge. "In that world, there is a very well-developed system of redundancies to

take the danger out of flying," he said. "In this nascent industry, the systems are going to have failures. Something will go wrong in the programming of the vehicle, and they won't have the same regulatory scrutiny nor the appropriate safeguards."

Gonzalez says she will push Miami Beach commissioners to impose few regulations on operating autonomous vehicles, though she says she recognizes that many questions remain unanswered. "I wouldn't advocate for large obstacles or financial restrictions because I see this as a community service," Gonzalez said. "Likewise, we are concerned about traffic. One of the questions we have for Uber is whether they would allow drivers to continue to operate on the Uber platform while they're piloting self-driving cars."