

Driverless cars shaking up Ontario's auto industry, warns minister

Transportation Minister Steven Del Duca told a conference on the future of the car that Ontario needs to lead the innovation of the transportation sector.



ERIC RISBERG / AP

A Google self-driving car is on exhibit at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, Calif. in 2014. Ontario's Transportation Minister Steven Del Duca says the province needs to be a leader in similar emerging technologies.

By: Tess Kalinowski Transportation reporter, Published on Thu Sep 17 2015

Ontario needs to become a leader in the emerging technology-based shake-up to the transportation sector, including driverless vehicles, electric cars and companies such as Uber, said Transportation Minister Steven Del Duca at a conference on “The Future of the Car.”

“Simply building more infrastructure — as important as it is— will not be enough,” he told the gathering of transportation planners and forecasters.

The conference, organized by Transport Futures, was looking at the trends.

“Millenials are saying, ‘Actually I don’t want that car when I’m 16 years old. I’d prefer to have a cell phone and I want somebody to be the driver (rather) than me being the driver,” said organizer Martin Collier.

Among the questions being asked is, was whether automated vehicles would expedite carsharing and industries such as [Uber](#).

“If we do go to that shared system amongst automated vehicles will people actually be paying for the service as a user pay? They won’t be owning cars but they’ll be paying for that service and can we also bundle the infrastructure cost into that cost so we get to road pricing and parking through the back door,” said Collier.

Today it would be illegal to test an [automated car](#) on Ontario roads, said Del Duca. While no Canadian province has yet brought out regulations for automated vehicles, U.S. states, including Michigan and New York are already looking at them.

“We have a chance in Ontario to lead with respect to automated vehicles,” said Del Duca, who noted that when the Liberal government was elected in 2003, no one had heard of Facebook and Twitter.

“The most important thing is to produce those regulatory changes as they relate to the Highway Traffic Act that would permit these vehicles to be used and tested and that’s some of the work the Ministry of Transportation is preparing right now,” he told reporters.

Del Duca declined to say when those regulatory discussions would become public. But in his speech he noted the urgency of the issue with some makers suggesting automated vehicles would be available to consumers by the end of the decade and by 2040, some forecasters are predicting they would represent 75 per cent of cars on the road.

Asked by a conference attendee whether the province will get involved in regulating the ride-sharing industry, including Uber, Del Duca said that remains a municipal issue for the time being but he hinted that Queen’s Park may eventually become involved.

“I’d be a little bit surprised in the long-term if the province can be completely absent from the discussion,” he said.

The minister reiterated the government’s commitment to installing high occupancy vehicle (HOT) [toll lanes](#) on some Toronto area, 400-series highways but he would not commit to offering more details this year.

Provincial transportation officials are still studying the PanAm Games HOV experience.

While residents are always skeptical of changes to the roads, the games showed that people will adapt, he said.

“We saw a ton of people carpool, 25 per cent more people taking GO Transit, we saw GO buses arriving at their destinations well in advance of their scheduled times — all good news. We had a couple of routes — QEW, DVP, Gardiner — where there were some challenges in terms of commute times. That’s part of the data that is being analysed so we figure out where best to position and how best to phase the HOT roll-out,” said Del Duca.

He would not comment on a Toronto report that looks at the possibility of [tolling](#) the Gardiner and Don Valley Parkway.

“This is a conversation that continues to occur from time to time in the City of Toronto. Council will take a look at that and they’ll make a decision on how they want to proceed,” said the minister.

Analysts at the conference Thursday suggested that the transportation sector is also being shaken by a new approach to cars by the Millennial generation, who see them more as a utility than a status symbol.

“Nobody’s saying cars are going away, but roles in the auto industry will need to evolve,” said Yvonne Rene de Cotret of Deloitte Canada.

Deloitte research shows 80 per cent of Millennials still say they expect to own a car within five years.