

AUTOMATED VEHICLE VIGILANCE

Staying Ahead Of The Threat

In the fall of 2016, in this column space, I sounded the alarm regarding self-driving vehicles and motorcycles. I believe I was the first to do so.

At that time, the U.S. Department of Transportation had just issued guidelines regarding what they termed “highly automated vehicles” or HAVs. In that column, I expressed

my horror that this technology was hurriedly being developed with little, if any, consideration being given to motorcyclists.

In response to my column, many told me that I had it all wrong and that self-driving vehicles would make motorcycling safer. Most of the sentiment was that those marketing this technology would do everything they could to prove that their equipment would make our roadways safer for all users—including the more vulnerable elements of the traffic mix, such as pedestrians, bicyclists and motorcyclists.

It would be my very strong desire for this to be true. My fear, as I expressed in that previous column, is that HAV technology will continue to be developed that doesn’t adequately detect and properly react to motorcyclists. As I write this, self-driving technology is being rushed to the marketplace for beta testing, despite not being able to adequately detect motorcycles in all scenarios.

HAV technology has the potential to be extremely effective at reducing the number of non-motorcycle crashes and fatalities. It will no doubt be framed as a proven life-saving technology that must immediately be more widely employed while its shortcomings are worked out—at our expense. But once that happens, it may no longer matter that the technology is inadequate for use in an environment shared with motorcycles.

As I wrote previously, non-motorcyclists

will see the exclusion of motorcycles from the roadways as a small price to pay for the greater good of reducing motor vehicle crashes and saving lives. Remember that we, as motorcyclists, are in the minority in this country, and the vast majority of government policy-makers are not motorcyclists.



By Rob Dingman

If you still think that I am being an alarmist, consider how quickly this technology is making its way into the marketplace and, therefore, into the traffic mix. As noted on page 15 of this magazine, General Motors has petitioned the federal government for a waiver for laws that its driverless car cannot meet because it doesn’t have a driver. Not only does this vehicle operate without a driver, it doesn’t even have a steering wheel. Another of GM’s models that has a self-driving mode recently was involved in a crash with a motorcycle in San Francisco that resulted in the rider filing a lawsuit against GM accusing the manufacturer of “negligent driving.”

Like it or not, this technology is already sharing the roadways with us and this is just the beginning.

In the past few years, it has seemed as though someone has hit the power-up button in the game of autonomous vehicle technology development. This is at least partly attributable to the proliferation of ride-sharing companies that are all looking for a leg-up against their competition.

The AMA has been actively involved in efforts to ensure that motorcycles are considered in the development of intelligent transportation system technologies since my time in the AMA’s government relations department in the 1990s. We have continued to reach out to government agencies, vehicle manufacturers and software developers to keep motorcycles both literally and figuratively on the radar screen.

In July of last year, AMA Vice President for Government Relations Wayne Allard and I met with U.S. Secretary of Transportation Elaine Chao to discuss issues affecting motorcyclists. Autonomous vehicles were a major part of our discussion with her. We wanted to ensure that she was aware that this technology was being rushed to market before it was proven to adequately detect motorcycles. Until our meeting, this issue was not on her radar screen.

One of the other topics on the agenda for our meeting with Secretary Chao was the federal Motorcyclist Advisory Council. The MAC was created by Congress to advise the Federal Highway Administration on a variety of topics, including road maintenance, work zone safety and roadside barriers, as well as automated vehicles.

We had previously forwarded to the FHWA the names of a number of AMA members for consideration for membership on the MAC, and we wanted to make sure that the MAC did not fall through the cracks during the transition to a new administration. We are fortunate that a number of AMA members were appointed to the MAC and that AMA Government Affairs Manager for On-Highway Issues Mike Sayre was appointed chair of the MAC. To the extent that the MAC can influence HAV decision making, it will speak out on behalf of America’s motorcyclists.

Automated-vehicle technology holds promise for improving motor vehicle safety and saving lives, but only if implemented correctly in a manner that considers all elements of the traffic mix. As AMA members and as motorcyclists, we must ensure that our voice is heard regarding the deployment of automated-vehicle technologies.

Please let your elected officials know of your concern about this issue! If you haven’t done so already, be sure to sign up to receive AMA Action Alerts—the easiest way for you to act—at www.americanmotorcyclist.com.

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