Driverless buses for three towns from 2022

But question of insurance for autonomous vehicles remains unclear

YUNITA ONG

In five years, driverless buses could be plying roads in three town centres — Punggol, Tengah and the Jurong Innovation District.

These buses will complement normal public buses and are aimed at providing first-last mile connections for residents and workers, announced Coordinating Minister for Infrastructure and Minister for Transport Khaw Boon Wan yesterday.

He was opening Singapore’s first autonomous vehicle test centre yesterday.

Of the plan to pilot autonomous vehicles in the three towns, Mr Khaw said: “We expect that the autonomous vehicles will greatly enhance the accessibility and connectivity of our public transport system, particularly for the elderly, families with young children and the less mobile.”

These towns will also be planned with autonomous vehicle-friendly features, he added.

The Ministry of Transport (MOT) and Land Transport Authority (LTA) also launched a Request for Information (RFI) yesterday to seek industry input on the key requirements for autonomous vehicles to be deployed.

While the news is exciting and reflects Singapore’s investment of millions of dollars in developing autonomous vehicles, the question of insurance looms.

INSURANCE

That is because insurance companies need to know who will take responsibility for such vehicles should they be safe enough to be insured, experts told The New Paper.

Professor Subodh Mhaisalkar, the executive director of Nanyang Technological University’s (NTU) Energy Research Institute, asked: “Is it the software manufacturer or the car manufacturer at fault in the case of an accident?”

“These are the issues that are far from resolved.”

A self-driving car from nuTonomy crashed into a lorry during a test at one north district in October last year. No one was hurt and nuTonomy said it was caused by an extremely rare combination of software anomalies.

In May last year, a man was killed in Florida when his Tesla car, which was on autopilot, collided with a tractor trailer.

While safety regulators later cleared the autopilot system, Tesla said it has improved its system to incorporate more safety features, such as to disable autopilot when drivers are not paying attention.

Mr Niels de Boer, the programme director for the Centre of Excellence for Testing and Research of Autonomous Vehicles, said insurers may find it hard to insure such cars in the initial stages of deployment.

He said: “We might be technically ready but... the insurance companies need to be convinced we are ready. Insurance companies are willing to insure vehicles will have safety equipped if we can show that the risk and liability are within control and they can come up with the premiums for it.”

When asked if he thinks driverless cars will eventually be insured here, he said: “It will happen, I can see it happening.”

In September last year, the General Insurance Association (GIA) of Singapore told The Straits Times that it has been engaging the LTA on the progress of autonomous vehicle tests.

It also said that the underwriting of autonomous vehicles and handling accident claims present a different set of challenges.

A driverless vehicle being tested at the Centre of Excellence for Testing and Research of Autonomous Vehicles. TNP PHOTO GAVIN FOO

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YUEN SUN

More than 20 trade associations are set to collaborate more closely in the national push to grow companies and help them venture overseas, with the launch of the new Trade Association (TA) Hub in Jurong yesterday morning.

The refurbished space, which was previously owned by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, contains shared facilities that associations can use to reduce operating costs, including meeting and training areas available on a pay-per-use basis.

At the opening ceremony, Mr Lee said the hub is “not just a brick and mortar space”. It will also help build a stronger TAC (trade association and chambers) community, and cultivate a culture of mutual support and collaboration.

The 25 tenants that moved in earlier this year include anchor tenant Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI), the Singapore Food Manufacturers’ Association (SFMA) and the Kranji Countryside Association (KCA).

The hub was mooted by the SCCCI in 2014. SFMA president Thomas Pek said that moving its operations from its headquarters in Chinatown to the TA Hub in Jurong has helped the association, which has more than 400 members including brands like Bee Cheng Hiang, to source for new technological solutions.

For example, it was able to partner another tenant at the hub, the Landscape Industry Association (Singapore), to sign a memorandum of understanding two months ago with the Waste Management and Recycling Association of Singapore.

They will explore how they can share technologies for converting waste into compost and recycling by-products.

“We also hope to look for new overseas markets or business partners when the TA Hub hosts trade exhibitions or foreign visitors,” said Mr Pek.

In his speech, PM Lee underlined the important role played by the more than 300 TACs here.

They are “aggregators and multipliers” in the business ecosystem, he said.

“You are close to the companies, and understand the needs of your industries well. You support small and medium enterprises to overcome the limitations of size by working together, and doing things that would otherwise be difficult for a single company to do alone.”

He added that he hoped to see TACs work to help Singapore companies venture overseas, and expand their global footprint.

GAVIN FOO

Singapore’s first test centre for autonomous vehicles was launched yesterday just outside Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

The 2ha space, which costs $3.6 million to build, will allow the companies developing autonomous vehicle technology here to conduct tests in a safe, controlled and configurable testing environment.

Coordinating Minister for Infrastructure and Minister for Transport Khaw Boon Wan said at the opening: “We aim to develop a progressive set of scenarios that (autonomous vehicle) developers need to master before they can be safely deployed in more complex real-life environments.”

The space was jointly developed by the Land Transport Authority, NTU and I2C as part of the Centre of Excellence for Testing and Research of Autonomous Vehicles.

It will be managed by NTU and will replicate road and traffic conditions, and is equipped with rain and pedestrian simulators to mimic scenarios such as aggressive driving, cyclists and low-visibility, rainfall conditions.

Seven 360-degree closed-circuit television cameras across the test centre will also stream footage back to a monitoring and evaluating system.

There are at least 10 companies and institutions that are testing autonomous vehicle technology in Singapore.

— YUNITA ONG

New hub will help trade associations work more closely, reduce operating costs

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Test centre for autonomous vehicles opens

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