Mock skyscrapers at Singapore self-driving test center

The govt sees technology as useful for public transport and delivery services

AFP Singapore

The road sweeper and a golf buggy move around the track with ease, jamming their brakes on when a pedestrian steps out and negotiating sharp turns.

Welcome to Singapore’s self-drive test center, complete with traffic lights and mock skyscrapers, which is at the heart of the city’s push to become a hub for autonomous technology.

However, while authorities are keen to tap a global drive by auto giants and startups to develop vehicles, the industry must still prove it is safe and persuasive people to use the technology.

The two-hectare site has a track with sharp turns, traffic lights, a slope, and a bus stop to simulate real driving conditions. Shipping containers are also stacked up to emulate how high rises could potentially block satellite signals to self-driving machines.

The CETRAN center, run by Nanyang Technological University (NTU), even has a rain-making machine that can simulate the frequent tropical downpours in the Southeast Asian city-state of 5.7 million people.

“Before you are ready to go to the public roads, we test them here to see if they are actually ready,” said Niels De Boer, program director at the center.

All companies must put their autos through the center’s testing and certification programs before they are allowed to hit public roads. The sweeper is being trialed as part of a government plan that could eventually see them deployed in the city, according to local media, while cars and buses are also being tested, and trials of delivery robots will soon take place.

Ordery Singapore is seeking to lure autonomous tech companies looking to trial their vehicles in Asia, where many other major cities are chaotic and traffic-clogged.

The government has led the drive, as it seeks to attract more foreign firms and because it sees the technology as useful for public transport and delivery services.

The first trials of an autonomous car on public roads took place in 2015.

In 2016, US software firm nuTonomy launched driverless taxi trials in public in Singapore, becoming the first company in the world to do so.

Authorities aim to deploy autonomous public transport in three areas by 2022, and in October announced it was expanding the area where self-driving vehicles can be tested to 1,800 km of public roads.

Self-driving vehicles will mainly be used in the public transport network for tasks such as shuttling people to stations and stops from their homes or workplaces, said Suboth Mhaisalkar, an NTU professor involved in the autonomous vehicle program.

De Boer from the CETRAN center said authorities were working on ensuring the correct regulations, such as traffic laws, are in place for self-driving vehicles.

Countries where private companies are taking the lead risk having “wonderful technology” but not being able to launch it in the market because of the absence of rules, he added.