Mock skyscrapers at Singapore self-driving test center

An autonomous road sweeper during a trial at the self-driving test center in Singapore. The center is run by Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

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* The govt says technology is useful for public transport and delivery services

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SINGAPORE: The road sweeper and a golf buggy move around the track with ease, lamming 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 persuade 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 frequent tropical downpours in the southeast Asian city-state of 5.7 million people.

“If you’re going to go to the public road, we test them here to see if they are actually ready,” said Nick De Boor, 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 trialled 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.

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 Mobileye 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 1,000 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 Selothri Mothia, an NTU professor involved in the autonomous vehicle program.

De Boor 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.