

# Editorial: Virginia makes play for self-driving car makers

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD STAFF OF THE THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Monday, July 18, 2016 11:00 pm

These are fast-moving times when it comes to automotive technology.

Advances in autonomous vehicles, that is driverless cars, may be closer to reality than we think.

Consider Tesla Motors Inc.'s introduction of semi-autonomous cars equipped with the controversially named "auto pilot" system, now in the testing phase. Three crashes have been reported around the nation, including one fatal accident. Drivers are warned that they must still pay attention when using the system, and be ready to take back control of the car when necessary.

No one has promised this technological transition would be easy. We are dealing with computers here, tools that redefined the word "crashed."

And though self-driving cars may seem quite distant from the average motorist in the Fredericksburg region, consider Gov. Terry McAuliffe's announcement this month that the Atlantic Gateway project includes an initiative that could put Interstate 95 at the forefront of self-driving car technology.

While the overall focus of the \$165 million federal FASTLANE grant is to ease gridlock on the interstate corridor between Fredericksburg and Arlington with more lanes, bridges and expanded commuter-rail service, there are plans for installing high-tech pavement on I-95 "for autonomous vehicle enhancement." Details are scant, but according to the governor's statement, the grant money "will provide the infrastructure to test and deploy driverless cars."

McAuliffe expanded on this a bit when he and elected officials from our region gathered at the I-95 Virginia Welcome Center in Fredericksburg to celebrate word the commonwealth will receive the competitive federal grant.

The governor talked with the media after the speeches, and said investing in cutting-edge highway enhancements could bring manufacturers of autonomous car technology and the jobs they provide to Virginia. That's a forward-looking effort that could pay dividends for state's economy.

With the introduction of the electronically tolled express lanes on I-95 in December 2014, there's plenty of technology already in place. There are sensors to read EZ Pass transponders, cameras, computers to calculate travel times, and message boards to relay the information.

These systems monitor traffic in the express lanes and set tolls so cars flow at a dependable pace that solo drivers are willing to pay. Though they're pricey, the express lanes should work more effectively when they're extended farther south to the Rappahannock River, which is part of the Atlantic Gateway plan.

Though there's much to be done before driverless cars jam America's highways, it's clear that I-95 in

Northern Virginia would put the vehicles and their systems to the test.

While Virginia wants to lead the way, don't look for city officials in Washington to embrace autonomous vehicles anytime soon.

D.C. is making way too much money off regular ol' drivers with its speed cameras. AAA reported last week that the Metropolitan Police Department issued more than 520,000 tickets in fiscal 2015, taking in nearly \$55.4 million in fines. And from October 2015 to February 2016, the city cited 365,122 motorists captured zipping along at speeds high enough to set off a camera shutter, gleaning \$37.2 million in revenue for the city's coffers.

If the current pace of ticketing continues for the rest of the district's fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30, AAA Mid-Atlantic estimates that D.C. could hand out more than 1.4 million speed-camera tickets and generate more than \$148 million in revenue. The auto club calls that "an unthinkable and unprecedented sum."

We have to agree that it's a travesty to separate that many drivers from their money, especially on highways such as Interstate 295, which has a 40 mph speed limit. D.C. can do better than to use technology to become the nation's capital of speed traps. Plus, speeding tickets could become a thing of the past once autonomous cars catch on.