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Auto parts makers' group proposes Stratford for self-driving vehicle tests

GREG KEENAN - AUTO INDUSTRY REPORTER

The Globe and Mail

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A self-driving vehicle will be tooling around the streets of Stratford, Ont., by the middle of next year if a proposal by the city's mayor and the Automotive Parts Manufacturers' Association of Canada is accepted.

The parts group hopes that it will be a Stratford city bus or public utility vehicle or a Lexus RX350 technology demonstration vehicle the APMA has put together with contributions from more than a dozen of its members.

Whether it's a bus or other vehicle, the plan is to take advantage of a rule change announced by the Ontario government last week that opens up public roads to testing of autonomous vehicles and indicates to global auto makers and parts companies that the province wants to be part of the technology revolution that is disrupting the century-old industry.

The APMA is applying to tap the province's Connected Car/Automated Vehicle fund, which provides financing of about \$3-million for projects that test self-driving vehicles and connected cars – those with wireless links, but not the truly sophisticated software, cameras, sensors and artificial intelligence necessary to drive themselves.

"We'll do this with or without partnership with the government, but we're happy that the government has provided some funds to make it easier," said Flavio Volpe, president of the APMA.

Testing on public roads in Ontario can begin as soon as Jan. 1, 2016. Several U.S. states permit testing of autonomous vehicles on their public roads. The University of Michigan has created a simulated town near its campus in Ann Arbor, Mich., where such cars and trucks are going through their paces.

The choice of Stratford as a testing area makes sense, Mayor Dan Mathieson said.



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"Stratford sits in the heart of automotive manufacturing and we're an economy like many in transition," Mr. Mathieson said. "We're trying to add high-value manufacturing jobs while starting ourselves off as a digital community."

The city, famous for its annual Stratford Shakespeare Festival, has a secure, private Wi-Fi network that covers the entire city, he said.

"Stratford is probably the only community – if not in North America, definitely in Ontario – that has this type of infrastructure, which plays well for them wanting to do some testing," he added.

If testing of a Stratford municipal bus is accepted, it would travel without passengers and with a driver trained in autonomous vehicles and ready to take over if there is a problem.

"It's a great test bed," Mr. Volpe said.

It's possible the connected car developed by the APMA and its member companies could be upgraded to an autonomous vehicle and be used for testing.

Auto makers and parts companies around the world are spending billions of dollars developing technologies that will enable vehicles to travel without drivers actually driving. Technology giants such as Google Inc. are also working on self-driving vehicles.

The benefits being touted are safer roads, less congestion and reduced fuel consumption.

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