

CO-SPONSORSHIP MEMORANDUM

TO: All Legislators

FROM: Senator Rachael Cabral-Guevara

Representative Dave Maxey

Representative Nate Gustafson

DATE: December 18th, 2025

RE: Co-sponsorship of LRB-4144/1, relating to: operation of autonomous vehicles on highways and providing a penalty.

DEADLINE: Wednesday, January 7th, 2026, at 3:00 P.M.

Under existing statutes, a human driver must be physically present and in control of a vehicle, a requirement that fails to account for advancements in Level 4 and Level 5 automated driving systems capable of handling all aspects of driving without human intervention. This outdated restriction has limited testing and deployment in the state to small-scale pilots, such as experimental shuttles in Racine and research vehicles at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, while other states have seen widespread commercial rollouts. By creating the Autonomous Driving Safety Board and a permitting process, the bill aims to remove these barriers, allowing for safe integration of autonomous vehicles while ensuring oversight through public hearings, minimal risk condition certifications, and annual safety reporting.

Beyond legal modernization, the bill addresses broader safety and efficiency concerns in Wisconsin's transportation system. Human error contributes to over 90% of traffic accidents nationwide, and autonomous vehicles equipped with advanced sensors and software have the potential to significantly reduce crashes, fatalities, and congestion by eliminating distractions, impairments, and fatigue-related incidents. The legislation incorporates safeguards like financial responsibility requirements, low alcohol thresholds for any human operators, and board authority to suspend permits if public safety risks arise, reflecting lessons from incidents in other states. Additionally, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation's Automated Vehicle External Advisory Committee (WAVE), active since 2020, has highlighted how vehicle telematics data from autonomous systems could enhance real-time traffic management, such as deploying resources during adverse weather, thereby improving overall roadway efficiency. This proactive approach ensures that emerging technologies are deployed effectively, striking a balance between innovation and risk mitigation.

Economically, the bill seeks to position Wisconsin as a competitive player in the growing autonomous vehicle industry, which could attract investments, create jobs in manufacturing, software development, and logistics, and boost related sectors like supply chain automation. Without updated regulations, the state risks lagging behind neighbors and national leaders; for example, Texas has enabled driverless trucking operations by companies like Aurora, while Minnesota is piloting systems with standby drivers. California and Nevada have long-established permitting frameworks that have fostered hubs for companies like Waymo, leading to economic gains through testing and commercial services. By centralizing approval at the state level and preempting municipal regulations, this proposal aims to streamline deployment, encouraging similar growth in Wisconsin.

Finally, the legislation emphasizes improved mobility for underserved populations, including the elderly, disabled, and non-drivers in rural and urban areas. Autonomous vehicles could transform paratransit services, allowing staff to focus on passenger care rather than driving, and provide on-demand transportation in regions with limited public options. The WAVE committee's discussions underscore these benefits, aligning with broader state efforts to adapt transportation policies to technological shifts. Overall, this bill represents a forward-looking response to rapid advancements in automation, aiming to harness benefits while prioritizing public safety and inclusivity.

If you would like to co-sponsor this legislation, please reply to this email or contact Rep. Maxey's office at (7-9183) or Sen. Cabral-Guevara's office at (6-0718) by 3:00 P.M. on Wednesday, January 7th, 2026.

Your name will be added to the Senate and Assembly version unless otherwise specified.

Analysis by the Legislative Reference Bureau

This bill creates an Autonomous Driving Safety Board, attached to the Department of Transportation, that may authorize the operation of autonomous vehicles on specific highways in this state.

Under the bill, a person proposing to operate an autonomous vehicle in this state must submit an application for a permit to the board. If the board approves the permit, the permit holder may not operate an autonomous vehicle under the permit unless they 1) title and register with DOT each autonomous vehicle to be operated, 2) provide DOT with proof of financial responsibility for any damages, injury, or death caused by the operation of an autonomous vehicle, and 3) provide the board with information detailing how emergency services personnel should interact with autonomous vehicles for which the permit is issued. A permit holder may operate autonomous vehicles only on highways approved by the board.

The bill provides that the board may temporarily suspend a permit if the board determines that the operation of an autonomous vehicle is an unreasonable risk to public safety. The board must then conduct a hearing to determine if the permit should be suspended or revoked, based on a determination that a permit condition has been violated or that continued operation of autonomous vehicles under the permit would be an unreasonable risk to public safety.

The bill requires a permit holder to annually submit to the board a report summarizing results and observations related to safety, traffic operations, interaction with roadway infrastructure, comments from the public, and other information the permit holder deems relevant.