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Google's private transit power play in the Port Lands

Company's push toward autonomous vehicles in its smart city development looks like an attempt to privatize public transportation on the waterfront

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BY ROSEMARY FREI MAY 2, 2019 8:10 AM



Sidewalk Labs

Will LRT plans for the Port Lands be driverless?

Will Toronto's Port Lands become a test base for replacing public transportation with driverless electric shuttles?

The 320-hectare area was revealed in February to be central to the plans of Google's urban-design division, Sidewalk Labs. That's in addition to the five-hectare Quayside proposal at the foot of Parliament for its "smart city" initiative that Sidewalk previously touted as being the sole focus of its sensor-laden affections.

What Sidewalk reps do not publicly discuss is the company's drive toward using autonomous vehicles (AVs) as a wedge to privatize, automate and deregulate Toronto's waterfront.

The Port Lands is ideal for this. Without the riot of roads, cars and other vehicles that crowd most of Toronto, successful use of AVs on this semi-sequestered site will prove they are ready for prime time. Sidewalk's president and CEO Dan Doctoroff is talking up the potential benefits of Sidewalk's high-tech plans.

3

“What we believe in [is] a future with autonomous vehicles, where they have an increasingly important role,” he told the Canadian Club on April 16. He added that the planned LRT for the site “can be the connective tissue that links the core and East Harbour and brings the eastern waterfront alive.”

Sidewalk did not respond to a request for comment from NOW about whether the company wants the LRT to be driverless. But a key member of the company’s secretive advisory committee of Canadian executives and urbanists is Josipa Petrunic, whose Canadian Urban Transit Research & Innovation Consortium (CUTRIC) is in the business of pushing transit agencies to replace their current buses and trains with expensive (largely unproven) driverless and electric- or hydrogen-powered vehicles.

Created in 2014, CUTRIC boasts to being one of the “2018 Clean50 outstanding contributors to clean capitalism.” CUTRIC’s more than 120 public- and private-sector members include the TTC and Ontario Power Generation to Thales, the French multinational company that is one of the main companies involved in completely automating Toronto’s subway trains, and Siemens, the German LRT- and electric-charging-system-maker.

At an April 18 conference on CUTRIC’s national effort “aimed at disrupting the utility and transit industries,” Petrunic called public transit “a welfare service supported by our social system.”

Petrunic also told attendees during a panel discussion at a November 2018 national public-private-partnerships (P3) conference that “the future for P3, the big billion-dollar spend, is [to] design, build, operate, maintain, finance, all-autonomous, all-connected, smart vehicles.” She noted the potentially “astronomically high” profit margins for companies that form P3s to create these new networks.

Or, she posited, “what if it’s not so much about making money off of this so much as radically saving money that is currently wasted for the taxpayer?” For example, Petrunic suggested, a

fleet of driverless shuttles could ferry people from LRT or GO stations to their destinations.

Petrunic asserted that the driverless shuttles also would be cheaper to maintain and operate than diesel buses, because AV shuttles are “optimized” and “digitally controlled.”

“If we think in those lines, we can very quickly get into millions and multi-millions of dollars of operational savings. But we’re putting on the line the unionized jobs, a driver culture, an operational culture at transit, and the way that cities have done business before.”

What’s necessary to push this transition forward Petrunic said in a Q&A published in February 2018, is “large-scale commercialization trials with industry partners.”

These will be very expensive; therefore “taxpayers will need to play the role of ‘riskophile’ investor in the short-term to push the bulge of inaction through the tight pin hole it’s gotten stuck in for the past half-century,” she said.

Petrunic’s messages are amplified in a March 2019 report paid for by Sidewalk and researched and written by members of the Solutions Lab in the downtown Toronto MaRS Discovery District (which is also part of the Toronto area “development site” in the Ontario government’s Automated Vehicle Integration Network).

To determine how to create market and policy conditions to speed AVs’ public acceptance and widespread use, the Solutions Lab team interviewed 13 people from industry, government and academe. Then they held a workshop with 26 representatives of organizations like Sidewalk Labs, Waterfront Toronto, First Gulf, Metrolinx, Uber, GM and the Ontario Ministry of Transportation, along with city planners from across the GTA and the chair of Toronto’s Automated Vehicles Working Group.

The vision laid out in the resulting Solutions Lab report is that by the 2030s or 2040s, almost every motorized vehicle in Canada, from cars to shuttles, subways, buses and streetcars,

will be electric, driverless, connected, shared – and profitable for corporations. The authors advise that governments facilitate this by prioritizing funding for automated transportation and taxing “single-rider” vehicles by distance and/or emissions. The text is sprinkled with soothing references to “privacy,” “clean energy,” “affordability” and “equity.”

The authors also emphasize that it is important to “make road safety king.” For example, they write, politicians need to create conditions for companies “to test and evolve technology to the point where it is sufficiently de-risked to operate in the public realm, yet they will have to do so in a manner that will not put humans and infrastructure in harm’s way.” The report additionally lays out a road map for rapid deregulation.

NOW checked with the city to see whether its Automated Vehicles Working Group is acting in concert with Sidewalk.

Eric Holmes from the Strategic Communications department replied in an email that the company is among approximately “350 industry and community stakeholders that city staff have been consulting with on the tactical plan for automated vehicles.”

Sidewalk officials’ public talking points hit all the right notes about AVs: according to them, cyclists and pedestrians won’t have anything to fear.

“Autonomous vehicles will always abide by the rules of the road. They will always respect the speed limit, they will always treat every user in such a way that their safety is respected,” Sidewalk’s Associate Director of Mobility Andrew Miller said at a December 2018 public consultation at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. “From our point of view, anyone who is sharing space with a car – a cyclist or a pedestrian – can be comfortable that they will not be taking their lives into their hands by being in that space with them. That is the future we want to make sure we can take full advantage of when AVs arrive.”

With files from André Berman.

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SIDEWALK LABS NEWS PUBLIC TRANSIT
TRANSPORTATION THIS WEEK IN NOW

by Rosemary Frei