



Waymo Self-Drive Tests Expanded



The Waymo self-driving car attracted a close look at a Google event in December. Testing efforts are being stepped up in Arizona.

By TIM HIGGINS

Hundreds of the autonomous vehicles are made available to Phoenix-area families

Waymo LLC, the autonomous-car unit of Google parent **Alphabet** Inc., will expand its testing efforts by making hundreds of self-driving vehicles available to families and urban commuters in the Phoenix area.

The test, which began on a limited basis in February, marks the first public trial for

the company after logging more than 2.5 million miles on city roads since it began working on the technology in 2009.

The Mountain View, Calif., company already has 100 Chrysler Pacifica self-driving minivans on the road and will eventually add a further 500 vans equipped with autonomous-vehicle software and hardware to its fleet. Waymo has been testing its vans and Lexus sport-utility vehicles with employees in Arizona, California, Oregon and Texas.

Waymo said that, starting Tuesday, it will begin accept-

ing applications through its website from people who want to be part of the Early Rider program. It isn't clear when people will begin riding in the vans.

In greater Phoenix, Waymo will test the cars in an area that is twice the size of San Francisco, including in the suburbs of Chandler and Tempe. Users can summon the vehicles with a special app at any time of the day. A safety operator will be behind the wheel in case human hands need to take over, as is the case with other test vehicle

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programs around the country. The vehicles will have steering wheels and brakes.

Waymo said the goal is to see how far people will go to replace their own personal transportation.

"We're getting some sense...that if we can figure out a way to get this right it could be persuasive for folks deciding whether they should add a second or third car to their garages," said John Krafcik, head of Waymo and a former automotive industry executive.

Waymo's prowess with self-driving cars, along with the rise of Uber Technologies Inc. as an alternative to car ownership and the deployment of a semiautonomous system by Tesla Inc., has stoked enthusiasm for a technology attendees of the 1939 New York World's Fair could only dream about.

While the technology is still largely unproven, auto makers and tech giants are fiercely racing to put commercial vehicles on the road and claim a stake in the \$2 trillion of revenue tied annually to autos, according to Deloitte Consulting.

General Motors Co., which acquired San Francisco startup Cruise Automation last year, is

preparing to add about 300 self-driving Chevrolet Bolts to its 50-car test fleet later this year, according to a person familiar with the effort. Uber, which is battling Waymo over a trade-secrets lawsuit, began limited testing of self-driving vehicles with customers last year.

Alphabet's intentions for self-driving cars have always been hazy, with automotive players concerned about sharing data with the search-engine giant. In December, Google's Waymo became a standalone business unit within the sprawling company, signaling the project was evolving into one that is expected to generate revenue. Mr. Krafcik reiterated in the interview that Waymo sees roles for the technology in logistics and licensing to auto makers.

Other developers such as Uber and GM believe robot taxis are a natural way to introduce the technology, in part to spread the cost of the expensive sensors over a money-generating business and to provide a confined area for controlled initial use.

Waymo hinted on its website in December that public test rides would be coming

soon, saying the next step "will be to let people trial fully self-driving cars to do everyday things like run errands or commute to work."

Concerns about the safety of self-driving cars abound. A crash by an Uber test car in the Phoenix area in March raised questions about the effort even though police said the tech company wasn't at fault. Federal regulators investigated the crash of a Tesla car last May that was in semiautonomous mode in Florida but found the technology didn't contain a safety defect.

Waymo's Early Rider program will mark a new chapter in testing, one focused on understanding how people communicate with the vehicle and what they do when they aren't required to drive. Waymo says it is looking for a diverse group of participants, who won't be charged for the rides, including families and people working late shifts.

Waymo began working with **Fiat Chrysler Automobiles** last year to put its sensors and software into 100 minivans for tests. The outfitted vans were displayed for the first time on the eve of the Detroit auto show in January.

—Mike Colias
contributed to this article.

Alphabet's Waymo has logged more than 2.5 million miles on city roads since 2009.