



September 15, 2017

The Honorable John Thune
Chairman
United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
511 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Nelson
Ranking Member
United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
716 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Support for the “staff draft” version of Senate autonomous vehicle legislation

Dear Chairman Thune and Ranking Member Nelson:

The National Federation of the Blind, the country’s largest organization of blind Americans, strongly endorses the current iteration of Senate autonomous vehicle legislation, presently titled the “AV START Act of 2017.” Along with that support, we urge members of the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee to move swiftly toward markup and ultimate passage of the bill.

The promise and potential benefits of autonomous vehicles (AV) are boundless, ranging from fewer road fatalities to greater independence to better fuel economy. AV are poised to be the next great American innovation. In order to unleash the myriad benefits that AV and their associated technologies represent, it is imperative that the Senate be proactive and expeditious in paving the way for the development, deployment, and full and equal enjoyment of AV for all Americans.

Much like the rest of society, blind Americans are galvanized and enthused by the prospect of AV. The better and more reliable transportation options that AV could offer would in turn enhance independence, productivity, economic outcomes, and community engagement. None of these society-wide benefits, among many others, will be actualized without a clear and forward-thinking approach to the AV issue at the federal level, which includes ensuring full and equal access for everyone.

In particular, it is vital that certain aspects of the “staff draft” are preserved and included in the eventual committee bill. Provisions protecting the blind and other people with disabilities from discrimination in the licensure process (Section 3) as well as others pertaining to accessibility of user interfaces and vehicle design (Section 9 and Section 10) are essential in promoting equality

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of access and opportunity. Without these two facets working in parallel, we could find ourselves in one of two ironic yet equally untenable scenarios. In the first, the blind could have unfettered access to AV via non-discriminatory licensing practices but then could be unable to operate the vehicles due to inaccessible user interfaces. In the other scenario, AV could be designed and manufactured ideally in terms of accessibility and yet many would be unable to enjoy the fruits of such innovation due to discriminatory and prohibitive licensing mechanisms. The current iteration of the Senate AV bill takes robust steps toward preventing either scenario. That is why we are endorsing the bill as it currently stands and calling for its expedient passage.

We thank both the Chairman and Ranking Member for their leadership on this issue. That leadership and perseverance will in turn help guarantee that all Americans are able to benefit from the tremendous promise of AV technology. We support you in those efforts and stand ready to continue working collaboratively toward our shared vision, one that includes the proliferation of AVs across the country as well as full and equal access to AVs for all.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Riccobono", with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Mark Riccobono, President

National Federation of the Blind

cc: United States Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation

National Federation of the Blind