



Government's Fear of Beerbots Doesn't Mean It Won't Spend on AVs

Insights

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Congress recently took action that would otherwise make it seem as if it is apprehensive of the robotic revolution and perhaps even hesitant to support AV initiatives in the near future. Late last month, the Senate approved an appropriations package that specifically blocked government funding for the development of “beerbots” – automated bartenders that mix and serve drinks without the need for human intervention. HR 6157 funds many federal agencies and provides funding for a number of congressional pet projects, but thanks to an amendment included by Senator Jeff Flake (R-AZ) and approved by the Senate, the appropriations bill prohibits the Defense Department from spending money on “the development of a beerbot or other robot bartender.” According to Bloomberg’s Tyrone Richardson, this provision was included to halt the flow of government research money on an MIT robot bartender development program. If the government is concerned about automated drink delivery systems steering jobs from human bartenders and cocktail servers, does this spell trouble for government funding of AV initiatives?

It appears that the AV revolution is safe, and in fact well-supported by the federal government. When President Trump signed the \$1.3 trillion spending bill back in March to operate the government for the remainder of the fiscal year, he approved a package that included \$100 million for research and development into automated vehicle technology; of that, nearly \$20 million is set aside for providing grants to build and develop federally designated proving grounds for AVs of all stripes. These pilot sites will allow AV developers to test, validate, and share information related to self-driving technology. \$60 million of the package is set aside for grants “to fund demonstration projects that test the feasibility and safety” of self-driving vehicles, according to a Reuters report. For now, the money is geared towards the proving grounds, local governments, and academic institutions, but not to private companies—so don’t go asking for a handout quite yet. This round of government funding is more about setting up a solid foundation upon which private AV companies will eventually benefit.

From an employment perspective, this funding activity may also result in the development of more information that may put us all in a better position to understand the impact that the AV revolution will have on the American workforce. \$1.5 million of the package is designed to lead to “a comprehensive analysis of the impact of self-driving vehicles on U.S. employment,” according to Reuters, “including the potential pace of job losses among truck, taxi and other commercial drivers, as well as the potential safety risks surrounding commercial autonomous vehicles.” This report could lay the groundwork for us all to understand the full employment ramifications we should soon

experience.

It's not all sunshine when it comes to federal government support of the AV industry, however. The AV START Act, which is aimed at setting ground rules for the development and operation of AVs on public roads, has been stalled in Congress for much of 2018. There seems little chance of any progress on this piece of legislation before the midterm elections, and it is always risky to count on any legislative action during the lame duck session that will follow. It seems we'll have to wait until 2019 to determine the fate of this bill and further federal support for AV development.

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Richard R. Meneghello
Chief Content Officer
503.205.8044
[Email](#)