PRO/CON: Self-driving cars could take over the road in the near future
by the Tribune News Service, adapted by Newsela staff, 9/14/16

PRO: Driverless cars will offer Americans a better quality of life
Technology is bringing big changes to the way people live their lives. The changes are coming faster than at any time in human history.

Thirty years ago, few could imagine a day when everyone could have their own pocket-sized supercomputer. Yet that is just what today's smartphone is.

Now, the driverless car is also set to bring big changes. It too could become part of everyday life in the near future.

On The Market In Three Or Four Years
Carmakers like Volkswagen and General Motors say they are almost ready to begin selling driverless cars. They say they will be on the market in just three or four years.

Once the driverless cars arrive fewer people will buy their own cars.

People will no longer have to spend thousands of dollars on a new car. Instead, when they need to get somewhere they will simply call for a driverless taxi.

Driverless cars may completely change the way people travel to and from work. Most likely they will also change where and how people live.

Suburbs Win Over Cities
More and more people in the U.S. have been moving to big cities. However, many would rather live in the suburbs. These towns outside the big cities are cheaper to live in and not as crowded. Life is easier and you can have more space.

So why are so many Americans moving to big cities anyway?

There are a number of reasons. One of the most important is that many of the best jobs are in big cities.

However, this does not mean that cities offer a better quality of life. In most cases, they do not.

Big cities like Chicago, New York, San Francisco and Seattle have the country's highest taxes. Crime and pollution remain far worse in cities as well.

Commuting Will Be Less Of A Chore
Driverless cars could completely change the way Americans think about where they live. Traveling from suburb to city center will become much less tiring. People will no longer have to do the driving themselves.

Because of that, people will feel less need to live where they work. They will no longer be forced to pay the high rents and taxes common in big cities.

With driverless cars, driving to and from work will be easy. Instead of being tiring, it will be relaxing. Passengers will be able to catch up on their reading or watch their favorite television shows.

Fewer people who work in big cities will feel the need to live in those cities. Instead, they will stay put in nearby suburbs. Once getting to work becomes easy, most of us will not mind the extra travel time.

ABOUT THE WRITER: Justin Haskins is the executive editor of Heartland Institute, a conservative and libertarian public policy think tank.
CON: Driveless cars are expensive and unsafe

Having driverless cars take millions of people to and from work each day sounds like a great idea. Actually making that happen will be very difficult, however. Big problems stand in the way.

Carmakers have been working on self-driving cars for years. They say the vehicles will be ready to take over the car market in the near future.

Supporters claim having millions of driverless cars will improve highway safety. Driverless cars will make even the far suburbs more convenient places to live, they say.

Many Problems Need To Be Tackled First

However, some huge problems still need to be solved.

First, driverless cars are still not very safe.

Driverless cars are guided by computers. Those computers rely on information about roads that is loaded into them. If something on the road changes, they are lost. For example, they would not obey a new stop sign.

They also have problems figuring out when objects such as bits of paper garbage are harmless. For that reason, they can change course suddenly for no reason. Such sudden shifts make crashes more likely.

Driverless cars simply cannot deal with changes or anything at all unusual. Passengers still must be ready to take over at a moment’s notice.

Passengers who do take the wheel can also cause problems, though.

Recently, a driverless car came to a crosswalk and did what it was supposed to do. It slowed down to allow someone on foot to cross the street. However, the human “safety driver” panicked and hit the brakes. No one was hurt, but the driverless car was hit from behind by another car.

Many More Maps Needed

A driverless car cannot work unless road maps are loaded into the car’s computer. Currently, the maps for Google’s self-driving cars only cover a few thousand miles of road. For driverless cars to work everywhere, millions of miles of roads would need to be entered. Updates would be needed anytime a road or road signs were changed.

New laws will have to be written for driverless cars too. They will be hard to figure out. For example, who should be held responsible if a driverless car crashes? Would it be the fault of the passenger, the carmaker or the designer of the computer system? It could take judges and courts years to figure it all out.

Totally self-driving cars will not be cheap, either. Making a car completely self-driving would add around $10,000 to its price.

People Love Their Cars

There is also the problem of getting people to accept driverless cars. Our cars are not just transportation. They also reflect our tastes and who we are.

Some people love driving down the highway in a fast sports car. It will be hard to get them to accept a driverless vehicle. For them, driverless cars would take all the fun out of driving.

ABOUT THE WRITER: Whitt Flora is an independent journalist who covered the White House for the Columbus Dispatch and was chief congressional correspondent for Aviation Week & Space Technology magazine.

Possible response options:

- Is our society ready for self-driving cars? Explain.
- Select any passage and respond to it.