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Monday 25th September 2017

Self-driving cars could make traffic congestion worse

Australians are looking forward to self-driving cars but are unlikely to share their vehicles with other travellers contrary to predictions made by transport experts and the motor industry, according to the University of Sydney Business School's latest Transport Opinion Survey.

The findings of the quarterly survey, conducted by the School's internationally respected Institute of Transport and Logistic Studies, indicate that road congestion in our major cities is unlikely to ease with the arrival of self-drive cars and could be worse than it is today.

The results of the survey, known as TOPS, have prompted the Director of the ITLS, Professor David Hensher, to suggest that the government may have to impose a levy on the use of private cars in order to combat increasing congestion.

One in four survey participants said they would buy a self-drive car for family use if they were available but only one-third of these adopters would lease their vehicles to other travellers when it was not in use.

Forty percent of participants also said that they would probably use their cars more as travelling became easier while more than thirty percent said they would use their car rather than use some public transport.

No survey participants expected their daily travel to remain the same in the driver-less era.

The results, according to Professor Hensher, indicated that there could be more traffic congestion on Australia's roads rather than less as predicted by some transport analysts, and a deterioration in public transport services.

"The survey suggests a strong uptake which is encouraging at this stage in the debate on the future of driver-less vehicles; however, the real challenge is getting society to become more sharing either by allowing others to use their cars or through a third party mobility plan" said Professor Hensher.

"Pundits promoting the virtues of driver-less cars, were suggesting that they would contribute to a significant reduction in traffic congestion. Our findings appear contrary to that view."

“We now need to contemplate how society more broadly and government might respond through new laws ensuring that disruptive transport technologies serve the public while managing their negative impacts through various measures including a private car use levy,” he said.

The TOPS index also indicated that Australians have steadily regained confidence in their local transport services but this is still a long way from the high recorded in September 2013.

TOPS is the only regular national survey to measure public opinion on transport related issues. The second 2017 report is at: <http://sydney.edu.au/business/itls/tops>.

Contact

Dr Chinh Ho, Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies (ITLS), University of Sydney, 02 9114 1892, mobile 0450 435 733

Trevor Watson, 02 9351 1918, mobile 0418 648 099, email trevor.watson@sydney.edu.au