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Autonomous Vehicles Take Center Stage: A Recap from the SAE/ATS Conference



From Left: **Danielle Chou**, Enabling Technologies Program Manager at the FHWA; **Bobby Cottam**, Transportation Project Manager at Burns & McDonnell; **Susanna Gallun**, attorney-researcher at the UT Austin Center for Transportation Research; **Alan Steinberg**, Deputy Chief Counsel at Caltrans; **Stephanie Dock**, Innovation Branch Manager at the District Department of Transportation; **Matt Daus**; **Yuichi Takayanagi** of the UTMS Society of Japan; **Chris Kopp**, Vice President at HNTB; **Joshua Auld**, Manager for Transportation Systems and Mobility at Argonne National Laboratory; **Chris Nalevanko**, General Counsel, Vice President & Corporate Secretary at Zoox; **Sam Loesche**, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at Waabi; **Jane Wilberding**, Senior Mobility Manager at HNTB; **Adam Millard-Ball**, Professor of Urban Planning at UCLA; and **Gerry Tierney**, Independent Consultant at Mobility and the City

On July 27, I had the opportunity to speak at the Automated Transport Symposium (ATS) in San Diego, hosted by SAE International. ATS is the premier global forum accelerating SAE Level 4-5 automation, convening leaders from industry, government, and academia to tackle the hardest technical, safety, regulatory, and policy challenges shaping automated mobility.

What makes ATS particularly valuable is the diversity of perspectives in the room. Autonomous vehicle policy is developing rapidly, but not necessarily uniformly. Federal and state regulators in the United States are taking different approaches, Europe continues to advance a more harmonized regulatory framework, and countries throughout Asia are experimenting with

everything from large-scale deployments to regulatory sandboxes and phased legalization. At the same time, technology companies, transportation agencies, researchers, attorneys, and regulators are confronting many of the same fundamental questions about safety, insurance, liability, infrastructure, data, enforcement, and accountability.

I participated in two workshops that approached these issues from different but complementary perspectives. The first, “International Review of AV Deployments for People & Goods: Lessons from Europe, the U.S., and Asia,” compared regulatory frameworks and real-world deployments across three continents, with an emphasis on identifying lessons that can be transferred between jurisdictions. The second, “Fleet versus Private AVs: The Range of Implications,” examined how fleet-operated and privately owned autonomous vehicles could create very different challenges for transportation planning and regulation.

Both discussions reinforced the point that AV regulation is no longer primarily about preparing for a distant technology. Governments are already making decisions about deployment, safety standards, insurance, maintenance, data, cybersecurity, liability, curb and roadway management, and interactions with law enforcement. Forums like ATS provide an important opportunity to compare what is working, identify gaps before they become larger problems, and ensure that regulators have a meaningful voice as autonomous transportation moves from testing and pilots toward broader commercial deployment.

International Review of AV Deployments for People & Goods: Lessons from Europe, the U.S., and Asia

“International Review of AV Deployments for People & Goods: Lessons from Europe, the U.S., and Asia” was organized by **Dr. Henriette Cornet**, CEO of Urban Innovate, **Tom Alkim**, Strategic Advisor for Connected & Automated Mobility at MAPtm, and **Dr. Stephane Dreher**, Head of CCAM at ERTICO – ITS Europe. The session took stock of real-world autonomous vehicle deployments for both passengers and goods across three continents, designed for practitioners looking to move beyond high-level narratives and extract actionable learnings for policy, procurement, and operational readiness.

The first half of the workshop focused on passenger AV deployment, with presentations examining developments in Europe, the United States, and Japan. Participants then broke into groups to explore six building blocks necessary for successful AV deployment: regulation; business models and partnerships; users, citizens, and the workforce; physical and digital infrastructure; vehicle considerations; and design and operations. Matt facilitated the discussion on regulation, rules, standards, and compliance, drawing on his experience as President of IATR and his work on emerging mobility regulation.

The regulatory discussion highlighted the different approaches being taken around the world. In the United States, AV policy continues to develop through federal vehicle-safety oversight, manufacturer self-certification, exemptions, and a patchwork of state laws and permitting systems. Europe has taken a more harmonized and prescriptive approach, relying on pre-market type approval and international standards developed through UNECE. Asian countries have adopted a range of models, from China's state-directed and city-level pilots to Japan and South Korea's phased legalization and Singapore's milestone-based regulatory sandbox.

The discussion also examined how the U.S. framework continues to evolve even without a comprehensive federal AV law. Congress is considering AV provisions through the SELF DRIVE Act and the broader surface transportation reauthorization process, while NHTSA has continued updating federal motor vehicle safety standards to accommodate vehicles designed without traditional driver controls. At the state level, approaches remain significantly different, with California adopting a more prescriptive safety-case model while states such as Arizona have generally maintained a more permissive approach.

A major international development discussed during the workshop was the adoption in June 2026 of the first global rules addressing fully autonomous vehicles through UNECE's World Forum for Harmonization of Vehicle Regulations. The new framework includes parallel approaches designed for both type-approval jurisdictions and self-certification markets such as the United States, built around a safety-case model and lifecycle safety management. The development represents an important step toward greater international alignment even as countries retain substantially different legal and regulatory systems for authorizing AV deployment.

The second half of the workshop turned to autonomous freight, examining deployments and regulatory developments affecting the movement of goods across the three continents. Throughout the session, participants considered not simply which regulatory model is “best,” but which elements can realistically be transferred between countries and which must be adapted to local legal, transportation, and institutional conditions.

Fleet versus Private AVs: The Range of Implications

"Fleet versus Private AVs: The Range of Implications," explored how fleet-operated and privately owned Level 4+ autonomous vehicles could shape everything from congestion and curb management to insurance, liability, maintenance standards, and public policy. Participants examined how different ownership models may affect communities in urban, suburban, and rural settings and discussed the regulatory tools needed to support safe and efficient deployment. The session was organized by **Danielle Chou**, Enabling Technologies Program Manager at the FHWA; **Stephanie Dock**, Innovation Branch Manager at the District Department of Transportation; **Chris Kopp**, Vice President at HNTB; **Bobby Cottam**, Transportation Project

Manager at Burns & McDonnell; and **Gerry Tierney**, Independent Consultant at Mobility and the City.

The first half of the workshop focused on the transportation planning implications of autonomous vehicle ownership. Panelists examined how fleet and privately owned AVs could influence vehicle miles traveled, parking demand, charging infrastructure, land use, and curb management, while participants worked through collaborative breakout exercises to develop policy strategies tailored to different community types.

The afternoon shifted to the legal and regulatory challenges surrounding autonomous vehicle deployment, beginning with a level-setting discussion by myself, and **Susanna Gallun**, attorney-researcher at the UT Austin Center for Transportation Research. Drawing on decades of experience regulating taxis, for-hire vehicles, and emerging mobility services, Matt emphasized that autonomous vehicle regulation should evolve from proven commercial transportation frameworks. He noted that many of today's debates, including insurance requirements, inspection standards, licensing, and operational oversight, closely mirror the challenges regulators faced during the rise of ride-hailing and car-sharing. Matt also highlighted that fleet-operated autonomous vehicles are likely to see broader deployment first because they provide governments with a clearly identifiable operator that can be held accountable for maintenance, insurance, safety compliance, and data reporting.

I joined a panel featuring **Alan Steinberg**, Deputy Chief Counsel at Caltrans; **Yuichi Takayanagi** of the UTMS Society of Japan; **Sam Loesche**, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at Waabi; and **Chris Nalevanko**, General Counsel, Vice President & Corporate Secretary at Zoxx. The panel discussed the legal distinctions between fleet-operated and privately owned autonomous vehicles. Topics included insurance requirements, inspection and maintenance standards, operational oversight, interactions with law enforcement, remote assistance, software updates, and evolving liability frameworks. Panelists also explored how responsibility may be allocated among vehicle owners, fleet operators, manufacturers, software providers, and remote operators as highly automated vehicles become more common on public roads.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was that fleet-operated autonomous vehicles may prove easier to regulate in the near term. Commercial fleet operators can be held to established standards for licensing, insurance, inspections, maintenance, and data reporting, while centralized dispatch systems also provide opportunities to better manage congestion and curb activity. Privately owned autonomous vehicles, by contrast, raise more complex questions about owner responsibilities, software maintenance, empty vehicle travel, enforcement, and liability that have yet to be fully resolved.

The workshop concluded with an interactive discussion among attendees, reinforcing that ownership models will play a central role in determining not only how autonomous vehicles are deployed, but also how governments regulate them. As policymakers continue developing the legal and operational framework for autonomous mobility, the session highlighted the importance of

building upon proven regulatory approaches while remaining flexible enough to address the unique challenges presented by increasingly automated transportation systems.

The Road Ahead

What does all of this mean for policymakers and regulators? The most important takeaway from ATS is that autonomous vehicles are moving from experimentation to implementation, but the regulatory framework is still catching up. The questions are no longer simply whether AVs can operate safely or when they will arrive. Regulators increasingly need to determine who is responsible, what standards should apply, how compliance will be monitored, and how these vehicles will fit into transportation systems that were designed around human drivers.

There will not be a single regulatory model that works everywhere. The United States' innovation-first, self-certification approach has helped accelerate deployment, while Europe has emphasized harmonized standards and pre-market approval. Asian countries are pursuing still other models, including phased legalization, regulatory sandboxes, and state-directed deployments. The recent UNECE work toward global rules for fully autonomous vehicles demonstrates that these systems may gradually move closer together, but meaningful differences in liability, insurance, data, cybersecurity, licensing, and operational oversight will remain.

For regulators, the challenge will be to learn from each of these approaches without simply copying them. We should also resist the temptation to treat AVs as an entirely new regulatory problem. Many of the questions now confronting autonomous transportation – like commercial licensing, insurance, vehicle inspections, maintenance, operator accountability, data reporting, enforcement, and consumer protection – have been addressed for decades in the taxi, limousine, bus, trucking, and for-hire vehicle industries. Those existing frameworks provide a valuable starting point, particularly as fleet-operated AVs move toward wider deployment.

The next several years will be critical. Congress continues to debate a federal framework, NHTSA is modernizing vehicle safety standards, states are developing their own deployment rules, and governments around the world are moving from pilots toward commercial operations. The goal for regulators should not be to slow innovation, but to make sure innovation develops alongside clear rules for safety, accountability, and the public interest. That is why conversations like those at ATS are so important, and why continued collaboration among regulators, industry, researchers, and transportation professionals will be essential as autonomous mobility enters its next phase.