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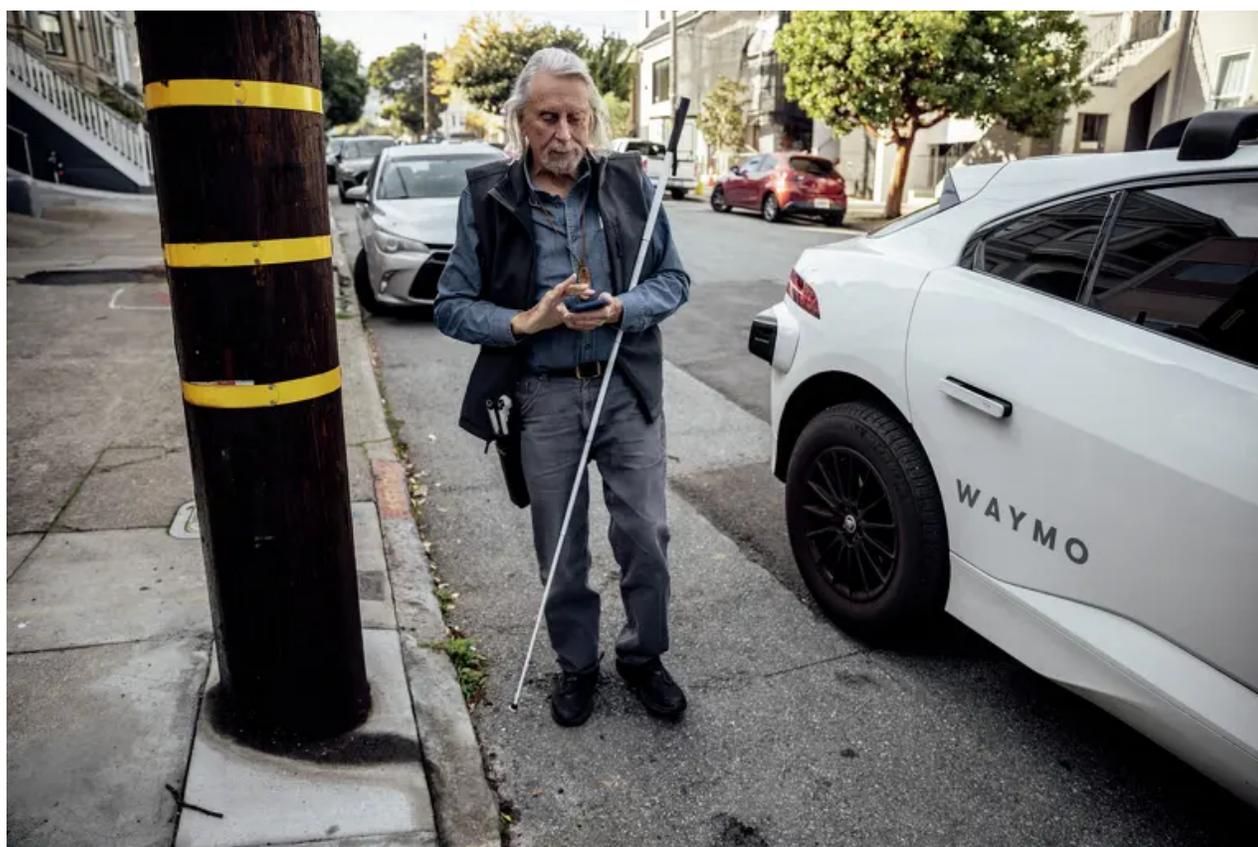
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OPINION // OPEN FORUM

For Bay Area seniors, Waymo and self-driving cars are the future

By **Jane Gould**, Contributor

Nov 18, 2025



Jerry Kuns, a retired mobility and wayfinding consultant, exits a Waymo after a ride in San Francisco in 2024. Kuns is blind and frequently uses the autonomous taxi service.

Stephen Lam/S.F. Chronicle



Listen Now: For Bay Area seniors, Waymo and self-driving cars are the futu

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When Waymo launched its fleet of autonomous vehicles on the streets of San Francisco in 2024, few older residents counted themselves as early adopters. Nearly two years later, in fact, most people over age 60 have yet to try a driverless taxi, despite the [company's efforts](#) to lure them aboard.

In some ways, this is hardly surprising. After all, their grandparents and great-grandparents faced a similar dilemma when the airplane was invented. They were hesitant to try out the newfangled flying machine, and a popular refrain was that if God wanted them to fly, he would have given them wings.

Back in 2022, just 1 in 5 seniors [surveyed by the Pew Research Center](#) said that they were interested in getting in an autonomous vehicle, and a local study estimates that [just 6% of San Francisco riders](#) are older.

But the reluctance to accept this new technology is also understandable, and I am certain that older people, those of us who are Baby Boomers or older, are the demographic that could benefit from it the most.

A decade ago, I wrote a book called "[Aging in Suburbia: The Must-Have Conversation About Homes and Driving.](#)" Back then, there were almost no options for older people who lived far from public transit to get around. Yet many, like my parents, needed to cut back on driving for medical conditions. Faced with this crisis, aging-in-place became a virtual prison.



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Considerable research shows that older people who stay connected with their communities live longer lives and have better health outcomes. Today, social isolation, experienced by 1 in 4 older adults, is associated with a higher risk of dementia and other health problems.

AARP reports that one quarter of adults age 65 and older, and a third of those 75 and older do not take a trip on a given day, often due to a disability or being homebound.

Older people often tremble when they have to visit the Department of Motor Vehicles to take the eye test and renew their driver's license. They have reason to fear. When they are deemed no longer safe to drive, a vital part of their lives ends.

Recently, a friend in his 70s offered me a ride home after dark, and I was apprehensive when he activated the self-driving feature on his new Tesla. I had been in a self-driving vehicle back in 2021, and it did not feel safe. Now it was pitch black, there were no reflective lines on the road and a few oncoming vehicles. The trip went smoothly.

Afterward, I talked with more Tesla drivers, and they were all eager to say that the company's self-driving technology had greatly improved. But I sensed a disconnect between the opinion of these satisfied owners and the general public, who recall videos showing near-misses by Tesla robotaxis. My hunch is that personal experience fosters trust, particularly a trip behind the wheel in a familiar car.

The autonomous car is a wellness antidote: It lets older people continue to partake in normal routines and recapture the thrill of spontaneity. Blind people or those with limited sight have already discovered autonomous vehicles to be a lifeline.

But I am familiar with the hesitancy to take that first trip.

I volunteer at Bay Area senior centers, and in 2015, I started a class for people who were new to ride-hailing services like Uber and Lyft. Many of my older students were initially uncomfortable using an app but saw the value after taking a few trips together.

The rate of adoption for mobile technology is especially important for places like the Bay

Area. We have the [third-oldest population](#) among the 20 largest U.S. metro regions based on median age, and the portion population over 65 is projected to rise from 17% today to over 25% by 2050.

We also have Waymo, the country's oldest and most experienced autonomous vehicle company. With people getting older and more autonomous vehicles rolling up and down San Francisco's hills, it's time for our public agencies to get on board.

Autonomous vehicle companies already work with state and local agencies to customize vehicles, share data and learn from onboard safety-operators/ambassadors. In San Francisco, they might also consider offering reduced prices for seniors or allowing riders to use a senior Clipper card to pay for rides.

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Bay Area senior centers can play an important role, too, facilitating classroom instruction and real-time buddy trips.

This transition to autonomous vehicles does not have to be hard. Older people are part of a generation that has continually had to learn to adapt to new technology. They went from storing knowledge on paper to using the personal computer and the internet; then they switched from calling on wall phones to texting on smartphones. Staying healthy and involved is their No. 1 priority, so confidence to try a self-driving shuttle or Waymo is just the next step forward. State and local government officials should help people take it.

Jane Gould serves on the Marin County Commission on Aging. She is a retired transportation planner from Northern California, formerly with the UC Institute of

Transportation Studies. She has followed the ebbs and flows of the electric vehicle industry since the first California EV mandate in the 1990s.

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Jane Gould

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