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Sidewalk robots get legal rights as "pedestrians"



Jennifer A. Kingson



"We've got about 1,000 of them running around out there," Ryan Tuohy of Starship tells Axios. Photo courtesy of Starship Technologies.

As small robots proliferate on sidewalks and city streets, so does legislation that grants them generous access rights and even classifies them, in the case of Pennsylvania, as "pedestrians."

Why it matters: Fears of a dystopian urban world where people dodge heavy, fast-moving droids are colliding with the aims of robot

developers large and small — including Amazon and FedEx — to deploy delivery fleets.

- "The sidewalk is the new hot debated space that the aerial drones were maybe three or five years ago," says Greg Lynn, CEO of Piaggio Fast Forward, which makes a suitcase-sized \$3,250 robot called [gita](#) that follows its owner around.
- "There's also a lot of people trying to deploy robots on bike lanes" where the bots can go faster than on sidewalks, he said.

Driving the news: States like Pennsylvania, Virginia, Idaho, Florida and Wisconsin have passed what are considered to be liberal rules permitting robots to operate on sidewalks — prompting pushback from cities like Pittsburgh that fear mishaps.

- In Pennsylvania, robot "pedestrians" can weigh up to 550 pounds and drive up to 12 mph.
- "Opposition has largely come from pedestrian and accessibility advocates, as well as labor unions like the Teamsters," [per](#) the Pittsburgh City Paper.
- The laws are a boon to Amazon's [Scout](#) delivery robot and FedEx's [Roxo](#), which are being tested in urban and suburban settings.
- "Backers say the laws will usher in a future where household items show up in a matter of hours, with fewer idling delivery vans blocking traffic and spewing emissions," [per](#) Wired.

The other side: Some technology evangelists think these laws are a spectacularly bad idea.

- The National Association of City Transportation Officials — NACTO — [says](#) the robots "should be severely restricted if not banned outright."

- "Uncoordinated autonomous delivery services could flood sidewalks with bots, making walking increasingly difficult and unpleasant," NACTO [says](#) in a report.
- "Drone delivery could significantly increase noise pollution and add a new dimension of chaos to urban streets."
- San Francisco did [ban](#) sidewalk robots in 2017, but has made at least one [exception](#) — for a test of a [Postmates bot called Serve](#).

Where it stands: [Starship Technology](#), which is in the vanguard of autonomous delivery robots, has deployed its "coolers on wheels" on more than 15 college campuses and begun a grocery-delivery [program](#) with Save Mart in Modesto, California.

- "The machines are designed to roll on sidewalks, crosswalks, places where pedestrians can go," Ryan Tuohy, SVP of business development at Starship Technologies, tells Axios.
- "They can carry about 3 bags of groceries or half a dozen pizzas with drinks."
- Ten states plus D.C. have passed laws explicitly allowing the robots to operate, Tuohy says, and those are the places where Starship does business: "We don't want to create a precedent that you just show up and start operating."

Yes, but: There have been reports of Starship robots getting [stuck](#) and [driving](#) into a canal.

- "Last October, the University of Pittsburgh paused testing of Starship robots after one wheelchair-using student [tweeted](#) that one partially blocked a curb ramp," Fast Company [reported](#).

- "The school resumed tests after Starship tweaked its software, then pronounced the service operational in January."

The bottom line: "We're still in the really early stages of deciding what it means to have a bot running round the sidewalk," Nico Larco, director of the Urbanism Next Center at the University of Oregon, tells Axios.

- "What happens if this thing falls over? What happens if it breaks? Where is the liability? What kind of insurance do you need?"
- "Because this is so early in development, a lot of legislators really haven't had time to think of what the ramifications are."

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- [Nuro gets green light for self-driving delivery service in California](#)



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1 hour ago - Politics & Policy

More FDNY members have died from 9/11-related illnesses than were killed in attack



The annual "Tribute in Light", which is a solemn display to commemorate the tragic events of 2001 and honors the nearly 3,000 lives lost, is tested ahead of the 23rd anniversary of the September 11 attacks in New York on Sept. 9. Photo: Fatih Aktas/Anadolu via Getty Images

The number of New York City Fire Department members who have died from 9/11-related illnesses in the decades since the attack [now surpasses](#) the number who died that day.

The big picture: The [FDNY](#) added the name of 32 individuals who died from health issues stemming from the rescue and recovery efforts at the World Trade Center to its memorial wall, bringing the total number who have died from Ground-Zero-related illnesses to over 360.

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Zachary Basu
3 hours ago - Politics & Policy

Trump takes the bait: Takeaways from Harris' big night



Photo: Doug Mills/The New York Time/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Over and over at last night's presidential debate, [Kamala Harris](#) set traps surgically designed to provoke, rattle and enrage [Donald Trump](#).

- And over and over, Trump stepped right into them.

Why it matters: With just eight weeks until the election, Harris delivered for Democrats on the biggest possible stage — the type of national stage that ended President Biden's political career less than three months ago.

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Rebecca Falconer
3 hours ago - Energy & Climate

California, Nevada face "dangerous situation" from fires, officials warn



People watch the Airport Fire burning on a hill above homes in Trabuco Canyon, California, on Sept. 9.
Photo: Mario Tama/Getty Images

Southern California communities were being threatened by [several huge wildfires](#) that prompted more evacuations, while officials in Nevada warned Reno residents to be prepared to evacuate with a grave situation unfolding Wednesday.

Threat level: The most immediate threats for SoCal communities were the uncontained [Bridge](#) and [Airport](#) fires, which were affecting air quality, while critical fire weather was forecast for much of

western Utah and Nevada — where firefighters are tackling the huge Davis Fire.

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