FROM THE DAILY

Driving toward the future

Driverless cars should be legalized, innovated in Mich.

On Sep. 26, California joined Nevada and Florida to become the third state in the country to legalize driverless cars. In part due to the lobbying efforts of Google, many other states are also beginning to push similar legislation, though Governor Rick Snyder cites budgetary concerns as the reason for the state's apprehension. However, this is a critical moment in both the history of the automotive industry and in the University community. With demonstrated competence in computer science, automotive engineering and massive project deployment, the University is in a unique position to participate in the progress of the car industry. As such, the University should take advantage of this technological opportunity by collaborating with industry leaders to pass progressive state legislation legalizing driverless cars.

Earlier this summer through a partnership with the U.S. Department of Transportation, the University began a year-long, $22-million dollar "connected-car" project utilizing wireless communication between vehicles in transit. The goal of this project is to shift the car safety model from the current incremental improvements — better seat belts and air bags — to avoiding accidents entirely. Whereas the Google driverless car is a step toward making each car safer, the Michigan project takes a holistic approach by seeking to make the traffic grid safer overall.

The University and Google already have a record of fruitful collaboration. This history includes the Michigan Digitization Project in addition to the recent adoption of Google Apps accounts for all students and recent alumni. Google CEO Larry Page earned his bachelor's in computer engineering at the University and currently sits on its Engineering Advisory Council. Google and the University have both benefitted from this relationship by cultivating some of the brightest computer science and software engineering minds in the country.

Similarly, Michigan colleges are also regarded as having one of the best automotive engineering programs in the country. With its proximity to the heart of the American auto industry, the University regularly collaborates with many car manufacturers on projects.

Safety, as with all transportation matters, is vitally important. More than 2.2 million people are injured in car accidents in the United States each year resulting in nearly $300 billion in damages. Though Google's fleet of automated cars has thus far impressively logged more than 300,000 miles without incident (besting the national average of about one accident per every 100,000 miles driven), nearly all of these tests have been conducted on well-regulated courses or on the sparse roads of Nevada. While more than a third of all fatal car accidents are caused by alcohol-impaired drivers, the majority of car accidents are still caused by driver error. Although this certainly underscores the need for cars to become more aware of their surroundings, driverless cars must show a statistically significant improvement in traffic safety over human operators before this is fully implemented.

According to a report released in July 2012, Americans drive approximately 258-billion miles each year. Any advancement in the interest of making American roadways traversed as safely and efficiently as possible is important. Having the brightest and best-equipped minds in the country at the nexus of innovation and history, the University has a special responsibility and privilege to usher in the next era of transportation with the most cutting-edge technology.