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## Despite Elon Musk's promise, Tesla Robotaxis in Austin still have safety monitors

The Tesla CEO said the humans would be gone by the end of 2025. Though some truly driverless cars have been spotted, most rides still have a person up front.

By [Andrea Guzmán](#), Staff Writer

Jan 21, 2026



A safety monitor rides in the front passenger seat Wednesday as a Tesla Robotaxi drives on Metro Center Drive in Austin. Tesla CEO Elon Musk promised the humans would be gone by now, but most rides still have them.

Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman



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Despite Elon Musk's promise, Tesla Robotaxis in Austin still have safety monitors

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In late December, Tesla CEO [Elon Musk bragged](#) one of his company's [Robotaxis](#) ferried him around Austin with no safety monitor in the front seat and performed perfectly.

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Non-Elon riders may not have the same experience.

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Despite the [Tesla Inc.](#) CEO's promises they'd be gone by 2026, many users of the company's Robotaxi system in Austin have noticed their rides still arrive with a human up front.

While there have been sightings of the company's Model Y-based Robotaxis with no humans aboard, [videos posted on social media](#) and rides ordered this month by the Austin American-Statesman have had a safety monitor present, suggesting Tesla still has work to do before it's ready to take off the training wheels.

**FROM DECEMBER:** [Elon Musk doubles down on fully driverless Tesla robotaxis in Austin by end of year](#)



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The company did not respond to requests for comment.

But Ashok Elluswamy, Tesla's AI head, [commented on a December video](#) from a Tesla investor showing a robotaxi operating without a safety monitor, saying: "And so it begins!"

The hit-and-miss driverless experience comes despite Musk responding in September to a Robotaxi user's social media lament about having a supervisor in the driver's seat. Musk then said they'd only be present for a few more months as the company was being extra safe.

"Should be no safety driver by end of year," Musk [said on X](#), the social media platform he owns.

He followed that up in mid-December by [noting](#) that testing was happening without occupants in the vehicle and doubled down on his promise they'd be driverless in the new year.

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That testing is apparently continuing.



New Tesla Model Y electric cars, some with Robotaxi markings, are parked on a lot this month in Southeast Austin. Austin has emerged as a major testing ground for autonomous vehicle technology amid a broader federal debate over regulation.

Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman

Another [viral video](#) captured a Robotaxi making a turn on South Congress with no human in the front seat along with another Tesla vehicle following closely behind. Tesla Robotaxis [have also been seen](#) turning into a depot without safety monitors.

But when it comes to rides that paying customers are hailing, riders are likely to find someone joining them. Even Grok, the AI chatbot owned by Musk's xAI, [noted this month](#) there are "no verified reports of customer operations without [safety drivers]; it appears limited to hearsay or unconfirmed claims."

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The Texas billionaire has a history of making bold promises and claims regarding the company's autonomous vehicles, such as his [2015 promise](#) that Tesla vehicles would be driving themselves in two years. In mid-2025, he claimed Robotaxis would be serving half the U.S. population by the end of the year. That didn't happen, either. As of now, Tesla operates about 40 cars in Austin and has launched a fleet in San Francisco that essentially operates as a ride-hailing service with drivers behind the wheel.

Austin customers who wish to ride without a safety monitor can catch a ride with Waymo. The Alphabet-owned ride-hailing company began letting Austin employees take rides without a person at the wheel in March 2024 before opening the service to the public early last year. It now operates about 200 fully autonomous vehicles across Austin and has fleets in several other cities.

[Current regulations on autonomous vehicles](#) operating in Texas call for operators to show that the vehicles can operate while complying with state traffic laws and are registered, titled and insured, among other requirements. But regulations do not specify requirements surrounding safety monitors.

But safety monitor or not, autonomous vehicles in Austin are reporting incidents in their tests. Data released by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration shows Waymo had 41 crashes from mid-June to mid-December in Austin. Tesla, which [has far fewer robotaxis operating than Waymo](#), reported nine crashes in the same time period.

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Peter Stone, a professor of computer science at the University of Texas at Austin, noted that autonomous vehicles aren't always going to be perfect. There can always be unexpected situations the vehicle hasn't come across before and it could respond in the wrong way. But the software can be improved so it responds correctly the next time and ultimately held to a higher standard than human drivers.

"Since we can't prove that they're going to be safe, the best we can do is get experience with them having driven lots of miles in lots of situations and statistically not making mistakes, or not making mistakes very often," Stone said. "So until that happens, the responsible thing to do is to put safety drivers in the car so that if they were doing something unsafe or there was a risk of them doing something wrong, they can intervene."

Musk also recognizes the bulk of training needed to fulfill robotaxi goals. He recently [wrote on X](#) that roughly 10 billion miles of training data is needed for safe unsupervised self-driving.

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“Reality has a super-long tail of complexity,” Musk said.

Jan 21, 2026



**Andrea Guzmán**

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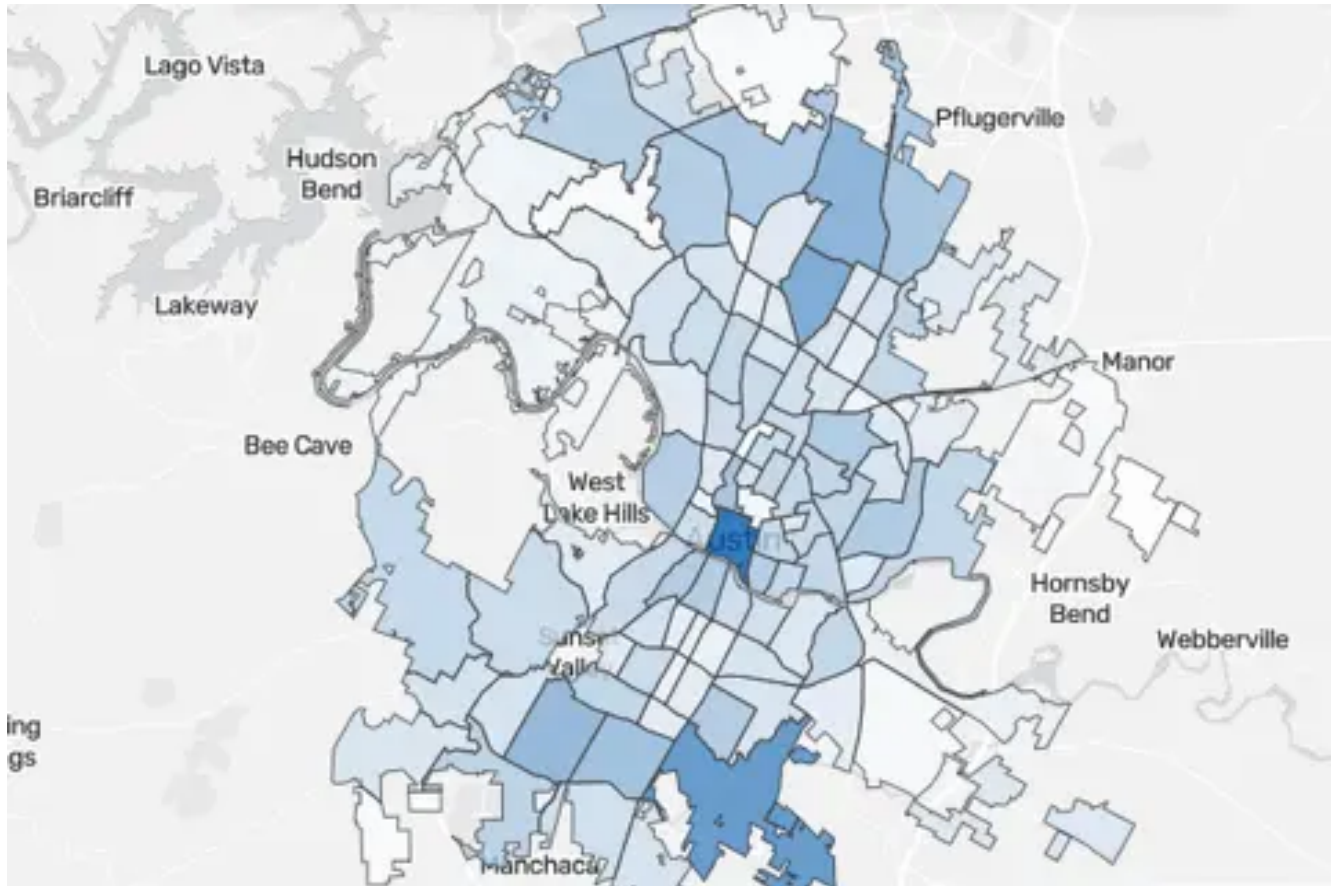
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