

Urban Robotics Foundation

info@urbanroboticsfoundation.org Toronto ON

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The URBAN ROBOTICS FOUNDATION helps municipalities prepare for the arrival of sidewalk robots.

There are 89,000 local governments in the United States, 88,000 in the EU and another 3,600 in Canada. Over the next two or three years, many hundreds of these cities, towns, boroughs and villages will be faced with the question of regulating sidewalk robots that deliver, sweep, pick litter, plow snow, provide surveillance, and dozens of other low-speed mobile tasks.

The core purpose of the Urban Robotics Foundation is to help local governments work through their sidewalk robot regulations

Since 2019, these small boxes-on-wheels have shown up to deliver food on many college and university campuses. They are now appearing in mid-density areas of cities around the world for last-mile retail deliveries, their single largest application. This includes places like Pittsburgh, Detroit, San Jose, and Miami-Dade County, far larger cities like Toronto, Canada, and many others in Europe and Asia.

Most local governments are unprepared to regulate and manage this new kind of traffic. Sidewalks, crosswalks, and bike lanes are complex traffic environments intended for pedestrians and cyclists. Some of these places are perfectly suited for robots. Others are not. A number of cities have experienced them with considerable success. A few have banned them.

Local governments that ignore them will experience complaints about accessibility and perceived risks from cycling or pedestrian advocacies. The local governments that ban them will deny a critical opportunity for their retail communities to compete with e-commerce and big-box stores. And they will continue to have large delivery vans encroach their local streets.

But local governments that prepare for them can find many advantages. Besides cleaner and quieter e-commerce and express package delivery, these small robots can:

Bring meals and groceries for disabled and senior residents;

Lower delivery costs for local retailers as they recover from the pandemic;

Reduce the use of idling cars and trucks to make small local deliveries.

As Ali Kashani, the CEO of Serve Robotics (an Uber spinoff), likes to point out “moving two-pound burritos in two-ton cars is incredibly inefficient.”

Nearly 100 robotics companies worldwide are innovating these devices. The variety is astonishing. Logistics companies such as Amazon, DHL, FedEx, Uber, and UPS are preparing to deploy them at scale. It is hard to see that small robotic delivery will not become a valuable element of last-mile logistics in any city that regulates this.

The Urban Robotics Foundation offers two critical services to its municipal members: drafting an international standard on members’ behalf for the operation and governance of these devices, as well as related education, research regarding management and certification.

Contact Lee Haber, Program Director lee@urbanroboticsfoundation.org or visit us www.urbanroboticsfoundation.org