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TECH

### [Self-Driving Car Startup Zoox Makes Safe Bet on Mark Rosekind](#)

*Enigmatic firm hires former NHTSA official to oversee safety as it looks to differentiate itself from competitors*

One of the buzziest startups in Silicon Valley, Zoox Inc., says it is taking a different path in the race to build self-driving cars: It is preaching safety first.

The secretive company used its first major announcement this week to tout the hiring of one of America's foremost safety officials, Mark Rosekind. Until January, he oversaw the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, an agency responsible for ensuring vehicle safety. Now he is Zoox's chief safety innovation officer.

"There have been other startups that have been, in various ways, cavalier with safety," said Tim Kentley-Klay, Zoox's chief executive, in a rare interview late Tuesday, without naming any competitors. "That's not our culture. We take this very seriously. This appointment...demonstrates that."

Other self-driving car makers say they take safety seriously. But the Silicon Valley ethos of moving fast and breaking things is often on display as companies experiment with the technology on public roads.

A crash last month by an Uber Technologies Inc. autonomous test vehicle in Arizona renewed concerns about the safety of yet-to-be-proven self-driving vehicles, even as local police and the company said its car wasn't at fault. Uber already drew the ire of California regulators when it tried to test its vehicles on San Francisco streets without a city permit.

Lawmakers at statehouses across the U.S. are debating the safety of self-driving cars as they consider legislation that could decide how such technology is used and who can use it. Some bills have proposed that testing be done only by auto makers, a hurdle that would hinder upstarts from Silicon Valley.

Those are the kinds of issues Mr. Rosekind tried to tackle during his time at the NHTSA under the Obama administration, where he pushed through guidelines for automated vehicles aimed at helping encouraging the development while also balancing safety.

"People are going to need to trust and accept this technology if it's to go forward, and that's only going to happen when everyone believes that safety is included and respected from the very beginning," Mr. Rosekind said in an interview.

Zoox is somewhat of an enigma in the rough-and-tumble world of autonomous-vehicle development.

Unlike other startups that are loudly staging demonstrations of their technology, Zoox has remained under wraps even after raising almost \$300 million at a valuation of \$1.55 billion. It has never released details about the engineers and professionals hired from Tesla Inc., Alphabet Inc. and Apple Inc.

Mr. Kentley-Klay, Zoox's co-founder and CEO, isn't a Silicon Valley wunderkind or a Motor City engineer—he is an Australian designer—and lured to the startup co-founder Jesse Levinson, who made a name for himself at Stanford University's self-driving car program. Mr. Kentley-Klay rarely speaks in public, and is coy about Zoox's business strategy beyond reimagining what automobile travel could be like if humans didn't take the wheel.

Mr. Kentley-Klay said Zoox is working to develop a fully autonomous vehicle system that can run as a taxi service in cities and operate in harsh weather. He is targeting 2020 to deploy the mobility service in the first city.

“We don't sell the hardware product, like a car, we sell the service,” he said, without providing more details.

Mr. Kentley-Klay wouldn't specify how Zoox would implement a safety playbook. But he did reveal that Zoox is exploring technology that could remotely operate the vehicles when they encounter hazards they can't handle, such as obstacles in the roadway. Other companies, including Nissan Motor Co. and startup NuTonomy have suggested they are developing remote operating systems.

Mr. Rosekind's experience in this area appealed to Zoox. An expert in human fatigue, he also previously worked on the remote operation of robotics at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

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