

# UK company to make self-drive vehicles in Adelaide

One door closes and another opens as ex-Mitsubishi factory to host autonomous vehicles



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By NEIL DOWLING

■ **MITSUBISHI'S** former Adelaide manufacturing and assembly facility could be back in automotive production after British autonomous vehicle maker RDM Group announced plans to make Tonsley Park its Asia-Pacific region base and start small-volume manufacturing.

RDM, a private company

based in Coventry and with customers including Jaguar Land Rover, Aston Martin and Bentley, makes low-speed autonomous vehicles - called Pod Zero - designed to carry four or eight passengers in densely-populated urban environments or for medium distance where conventional vehicles may be inefficient.

RDM Group CEO, David

Keene, said there was “massive demand for creating mobility solutions in Australia and we want to make sure our technology is at the forefront of any new developments”.

“Our Adelaide office is the first step in a plan that will hopefully see us build a bespoke assembly facility where we can build hundreds of autonomous pods each year.”

RDM is being located at Tonsley Park - once part of Mitsubishi Motors Australia Ltd - in buildings now reconstituted as the Tonsley Innovation Precinct for green technology. The site, which adjoins Flinders University's Tonsley campus and a TAFE, includes offices for Siemens, Zen Energy, Micro X and Signostics, and also has

housing and retail facilities.

South Australian minister for transport and infrastructure, Stephen Mullighan, said the global autonomous vehicle market was expected to be worth \$90 billion by 2020 and that the state was “in a unique position to leverage the potential of this burgeoning industry”.

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The RDM office in the Flinders University campus at Tonsley Park opened last week and is run by consultant and former project manager of Green Distillation Technologies, Roger van der Lee, as autonomous vehicles program director.

RDM's UK-based sales and marketing director, Miles

Garner, told *GoAutoNews Premium* that establishing business in Australia was done for two reasons - the proximity to the huge market of Asia and the engineering acumen of the Australian workforce that remain after the closure of the domestic vehicle manufacturing industry.

He said that the next step was an incubator unit that

would lead to the manufacture of autonomous vehicles.

"Manufacturing is our goal," Mr Garner said.

"We plan to make the pod in Australia, not just assemble the unit there. The only part we would make in the UK would be the autonomous control systems (ACS) brain of the vehicle. We buy everything to make the pods

within a 30km radius of our facility in Coventry.

"RDM can now manufacture up to 200 driverless pods a year at Coventry and this could grow if we move to a new purpose-built facility."

Mr Garner said he could not put a time on when manufacturing in Australia would start.

"It would be volume

related," he said.

"If we get a substantial order, we would ramp it up."

RDM has applied for funding through the South Australian government's \$10 million Future Mobility Lab Fund. More than 40 applications, worth \$20 million, have been received by the Fund.

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**- Sales and marketing director, Miles Garner**



## **From 2001: A Space Odyssey comes the pod**

■ **THE RDM Pod Zero** is designed to carry from two to eight people in congested or traffic-sensitive urban zones.

Three units were initially tested and then a fleet of 40 were subsequently trialled with great success in the UK town of Milton Keynes.

RDM said the Pod Zero was ideal for local government transport authorities, airports, shopping centres and campuses looking for a “first and last mile” transport solution.

The vehicle has an operational range of 100km, can travel with a top speed of 25km/h and has been designed to accommodate passengers with special needs, such as wheelchair access and aids to assist the visually impaired.

The pod is powered by electric motors and uses the latest Lidar (light and radar) technology to “see” its surroundings. Lidar is used by all major autonomous car-makers except Tesla.

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Mr Garner said RDM had applied for funding and said it would go a long way to fast-tracking the development and manufacturing of the pods.

“If we get funding, it would be excellent. If not, we will continue with our plan,” he said.

Mr Garner said RDM was initially attracted to Adelaide by global promotion done by the Australian Driverless Vehicle Initiative (ADVI).

ADVI executive director, Rita Excell, said RDM was one of a group of advanced manufacturing industry

companies that were aiming to establish a base in South Australia.

She said an ADVI economic paper identified that up to 15,000 jobs could be created from the automated vehicle industry and that South Australia was well placed to attract a large share.

The RAA senior manager of mobility and automotive policy, Mark Borlace, said the RAA was looking to work with RDM and its partner, the Flinders University, to learn how low-speed autonomous vehicles could be integrated into on-demand journeys.

“We need to be at the front end of autonomous vehicle development and the siting of RDM in Adelaide is a perfect opportunity for us to develop policies,” he said.

“Australia is seen by RDM as being a bridge into Asia. We have an accepted level of engineering skills in Australia to make manufacturing possible and we are geographically close to huge market opportunities in Asia.

“People think of autonomous vehicles and many think it’s a Mercedes-Benz S-Class driving hands-free down an autobahn,” Mr Borlace said.

“In fact, much of the work in autonomous vehicles is in low-speed environments with the accent on transporting people where conventional transport solutions are inappropriate or inefficient.

“The RDM Pod Zero, for example, travels at up to 25km/h, equivalent to the speed of a jogger.”

The Pod Zero was shown at last October’s ITS show in Melbourne. Mr Garner said that was a non-working pod but he said the company plans to display a working pod at this year’s ADVI conference in June.