Rumored lidar shopping suggests Apple is still serious about autonomy



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Apple has talked to at least four different companies about purchasing lidar sensors, Reuters reports. Apple is also reportedly working on a home-built lidar sensor. The news suggests that Apple is still taking its self-driving car effort, known internally as Project Titan, seriously.

Apple hasn’t publicly revealed what kind of self-driving

technology it is working on, and indeed reporting suggests that the company's plans have shifted over time. Way back in 2015, the Wall Sreet Journal reported that Apple was developing an electric car and had hundreds of people working on the project. The next year, the New York Times reported that Apple was scaling back the project and was looking to partner with an existing automaker rather than building a car from scratch. By 2017, the Times was reporting that Apple had "put off any notion of an Apple-branded autonomous vehicle and is instead working on the underlying technology that allows a car to drive itself."

Last year, Apple rehired Doug Field, a former Apple executive who had left to oversee Tesla's vehicle engineering—once again sparking speculation that Apple might get into manufacturing. In January, Apple laid off about 200 Project Titan engineers and reassigned others in a shakeup led by Field.

Despite all this turmoil, Apple still seems to be devoting significant resources to the effort. Reuters says that the project has about 1,200 people remaining after the layoffs earlier this year.

The company is specifically shopping for sensors with a range in the hundreds of meters. That suggests that Apple is developing technology for fully self-driving cars traveling at highway speeds. Slower vehicles can get away with cheaper, shorter-range sensors. Companies working to add lidar to next-generation driver-assistance systems also generally see shorter-range lidar as sufficient.

The fact that Apple is shopping for lidar doesn't necessarily mean the company is going to build its own vehicles. Apple might be trying to develop a turnkey autonomy stack that it could license to existing carmakers—the same business model being pursued by the prominent self-driving startup Aurora. Apple might even just be looking for lidar sensors to use on its next generation of self-driving prototypes while

developing a software-only product. Or—most likely—Apple hasn’t made a final decision about what kind of product to create and is keeping its options open by developing several different technologies simultaneously.

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