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The Bus Stops Here: Ridesharing Can Be a Complement or Threat

By [Madison Area Bu... \(/?q=user/8183\)](#) | Wed, 01/25/2017 - 5:02pm

The Stops Here is produced monthly by members of the Madison Area Bus Advocates. This month's column is by Susan De Vos.



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[q=content/rideshare\)](#)

(Thomas Yonash/Madison Commons)

This column continues a discussion of ridesharing [begun last time](http://madisoncommons.org/?q=content/the-bus-stops-here-for-ride-shares-too) (<http://madisoncommons.org/?q=content/the-bus-stops-here-for-ride-shares-too>). So-called Transportation Network Companies (or TNCs) such as Uber and Lyft are just recent manifestations of what has been a long-standing situation in Madison in which taxis and other privately-run ride sharing services are often used by transit riders.

The previous column tried to outline the larger picture and pointed to the well-developed ridesharing web pages of the [Madison Area Transportation Planning Board](http://www.madisonareampo.org/rideshare/GuaranteedRide.cfm) (<http://www.madisonareampo.org/rideshare/GuaranteedRide.cfm>). It ended by asking about the relationship between private ridesharing arrangements and public transportation, the extent to which any ridesharing enterprise (whether taxi, TNC or something else) truly complements bus use or simply provides a governmental agency such as the Dane County Airport or Metro Transit an excuse not to provide comprehensive geographic coverage or late night, holiday or any public transit service (in the case of Dane County).

If someone needs to travel outside the hours when, or area where, the bus operates efficiently (most everywhere), they may use some form of ridesharing. Even with a liberal definition of “regularly scheduled transit stop” in which buses might only operate at peak hours during the five day work-week, Metro services less than two-thirds of Madison’s geographic area.

At best, even the core buses do not run between about midnight and 5:30 a.m. during the work week, or 11:00 p.m. and 7 a.m. on the weekend. And such core buses as the #4 and #5 run only hourly after 6:00 p.m. during the work week. Despite many places having events in the evening, it is impossible to travel there and back by bus.

Overcoming such limitations can require using some form of ride share. But that takes more money than should be necessary. A bus rider typically pays a quarter of the total cost of a ride.

Although ideally there should be no fare at all, the current situation is that Metro uses tax revenue as well as farebox revenue to operate its system. The situation of a private ridesharing enterprise is worse. It needs to recover its entire operational cost and additionally make a profit. In the long run anyway.

In Madison, Metro contracts out many of its Paratransit rides to private companies, only charging the passenger a standard Paratransit fare that is a fraction of the actual cost paid to the vendor. But Metro+ is a special program for disabled people with rigorous eligibility requirements stipulated by the Americans with Disabilities Act. Use of other ridesharing services is left up to the individual concerned.

Transit agencies elsewhere have adopted the practice of providing a cab or TNC ride to remote locations while only charging for a regular bus ride, figuring that a reasonable way to provide more service at relatively low cost.

Some people feel that Metro should do so too, especially for second- or third-shift workers who need to travel when regular bus service is not available. The idea is that like offering parking, doing so could be a relatively low-cost way to support employment activity within the City of Madison itself.

There is danger in such a stance however, while good land use planning and public investment in robust public transit agencies would not only make the practice unnecessary but would strengthen our infrastructure.

Even ignoring for the moment the fact that public agencies must balance economic efficiency with such social values as “transportation equity,” companies such as Uber are purposefully under-charging in an attempt to take over the market, while providing short-term justification for under-investing in a robust public transit system. Then, when public agencies have been sufficiently weakened, they can raise fares without facing the stiff opposition they would face now:

“Right now, ... Uber has a worse farebox recovery ratio ... than most of the subway systems it is competing with. Not for long,” [wrote Henry Grabar in Slate last month](http://www.slate.com/articles/business/metropolis/2016/12/cities_are_cutting_transportation_service_because_they_think_uber_will_fill.html) (http://www.slate.com/articles/business/metropolis/2016/12/cities_are_cutting_transportation_service_because_they_think_uber_will_fill.html). “Investors will expect profits—which means Uber rides will have to cost more. We’ll look back on these couple years as a magical era during which a heavily capitalized startup let us hop around town for pennies on the dollar. When

prices come back up, Americans will find that cuts to transit service and reluctance to invest in expansion have left us in bad shape.”

While fair competition can strengthen everyone concerned – for instance help push for and justify the improvement and expansion of Metro’s service - TNCs are not competing fairly and Uber at least wants to dominate the market and privatize a public good.

Many people try to look the other way and talk about how ridesharing [complements regular transit](http://usa.streetsblog.org/2016/09/09/no-ubers-not-going-to-replace-buses-but-it-can-complement-them/) (<http://usa.streetsblog.org/2016/09/09/no-ubers-not-going-to-replace-buses-but-it-can-complement-them/>) by “reaching spread out or hard-to-serve areas” or how TNCs are “Lyfting Mobility to Uber Heights.” But more honest appraisals talk about “predatory pricing,” state outright “[Let’s quit pretending about Uber](http://humantransit.org/2016/10/lets-quit-pretending-about-uber.html) (<http://humantransit.org/2016/10/lets-quit-pretending-about-uber.html>)” or ask rhetorically “Is the tide turning against [techno-Libertarian transport planning](http://humantransit.org/2016/10/is-the-tide-turning-against-techno-libertarian-transport-planning.html) (<http://humantransit.org/2016/10/is-the-tide-turning-against-techno-libertarian-transport-planning.html>)?”

Ironically, much of the argument for treating our bus system as a public good that goes beyond a simple monetary figure was nicely articulated by Mayor Paul Soglin himself although he was arguing in favor of regulating TNCs like taxis, not regarding the need to better support our transit system.

At the February 2015 meeting of the Transit and Parking Commission, he is reported to have said that government required utilities to offer services widely for the overall good of the community while just servicing wealthy communities at peak times might be more profitable but would not do that. Service had to be [extended to isolated areas and less popular times](https://madison.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=M&ID=346659&GUID=0461978A-A327-41E6-B3D1-BA41071F8AE5) (<https://madison.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=M&ID=346659&GUID=0461978A-A327-41E6-B3D1-BA41071F8AE5>) (item F2).

Similar to our need for a skeletal bus system that operates even [during the most inclement of weather](http://www.madisoncommons.org/?q=content%2Fthe-bus-stops-here-consider-an-icebus-to-keep-service-running-when-snow-falls) (<http://www.madisoncommons.org/?q=content%2Fthe-bus-stops-here-consider-an-icebus-to-keep-service-running-when-snow-falls>), we need buses to cover more hours of the day. And if more of our land use were designed for transit, bicycle and pedestrian use rather than the automobile, our bus system could cover more than 64 percent of our city as well.

TAGS:

