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The Bus Stops Here: For Ride Shares Too

By [Madison Area Bu... \(/?q=user/8183\)](#) | Thu, 12/29/2016 - 9:40am

The Bus Stops Here is produced monthly by members of the [Madison Area Bus Advocates](#) (<http://www.busadvocates.org/>). This month's article is by Susan DeVos.

Ridesharing is an important way to complement bus riding, although how much is complement, how much is replacement and how much is healthy competition are important questions.

Madison has certainly seen its share of drama on the subject, and people in Madison now commonly use such so-called Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) as Uber and Lyft instead of, or in addition to, the bus. TNCs embody a new form of ride sharing, which unlike bike or car sharing, involves riding in a vehicle along with others (usually in a van or car). We try to lay provisional groundwork here that will enable us to more fully address questions about complementarity or replacement next time, given that the situation in Madison, as in much of the world, is constantly changing.

The least formal type of ridesharing in Madison is probably when a neighbor or friend offers another an impromptu ride. Bus riders may pay cash fares instead of buying an unlimited ride bus pass in part because they often get a ride to their destination instead of having to use the bus. Cash requires neither planning nor investment.

A more formal type of ridesharing in Madison is carpooling or vanpooling, in conjunction with or independently of the bus. People can benefit from the economy of scale of pooling resources and/or there may be no bus service where or when they need to travel. Still, their transportation needs match with those of others so they can share rides.

The Madison Area MPO has hosted a website for years called [Rideshare, Etc](#) (<https://www.rideshareetc.org/>). that helps match people with others and provides tips for "alternative" types of travel. One feature of particular importance to

bus users is the emergency backup program called [Guaranteed Ride Home](#)

(<http://www.madisonareampo.org/rideshare/GuaranteedRide.cfm>). The program enables people to deal with a crisis without needing easy access to their own car.

The ridesharing landscape has changed recently with the advent of smartphone technologies. What is now called Lyft is the public version of a ride sharing company originally called Zimride created by college students back in 2007. What used to involve bulletin boards or Craigslist ride boards was converted into a more efficient matching system, initially with Facebook in 2007 and then with a smartphone app beginning in 2012. The original Zimride company sold its name and campus operations to the Enterprise car rental company in 2013. The current Zimride does not operate at UW-Madison but does operate at other UW campuses.

Uber started operating in Madison a few years ago, rather aggressively so. Both Uber and Lyft are sometimes referred to as “pirate taxis” that have exploited holes in our law regulating contract labor, insurance and vehicular travel and are thus on shaky legal ground. California’s Public Utilities Commission in 2013 attempted to define and regulate them as “Transportation Network Companies” (TNCs). Similar to taxis in Madison, people use their phones to arrange a ride driven by someone else. Unlike taxis, TNC drivers use their own personal vehicles.

Taxis in Madison are a public utility regulated by the city’s Transit and Parking Commission for the common good. Regulations include the stipulation that they operate all 24 hours of every day, and everywhere in the city. Taxis are not required to buy a medallion in order to operate as in such cities as Milwaukee. Nor does the city set fares. In addition to local regulations, federal regulation has stipulated that a city has to have a complementary accessible cab service; a complicated issue in its own right that cannot be addressed here.

In February of 2015, Madison’s Transit and Parking Commission held an exhausting public hearing on how to deal with companies such as Uber and Lyft. A subcommittee had recommended that they be regulated in a manner similar to taxis. There was much testimony both against and in favor of that proposal ([item F2 of the Minutes](#) (<https://madison.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=M&ID=346659&GUID=0461978A-A327-41E6-B3D1-BA41071F8AE5>)). Some bus riders felt that Uber/Lyft were far superior to taxis because of they were less fettered by regulation while others feared that laxer regulation undermined the market’s long term viability.

At its March meeting ([item H1 of the Minutes](#) (<https://madison.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=M&ID=346660&GUID=53BFF6A0-033C-4123-B8B3-BoDAA438CB4D>)) the Commission voted to impose regulations on Uber/Lyft similar to what existed for taxis while recognizing that certain legal ambiguities persisted. In a move that many consider motivated by hostility toward the City of Madison, the State shortly thereafter nullified that ruling with legislation of its own that called companies such as Uber and Lyft different from taxis and subject to state, not local, regulation. But doing so did not settle the many legal issues discussed by the Transit Parking Commission and others around the world.

The question for bus riders is to what extent 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 late night, holiday or even all-day transit service. Is public transportation a basic human right? And if so, what does that mean? Should a city the size of Madison run buses all the time or is it not big enough? If the City provides resources for streets, should it also provide an equal amount of resources for sidewalks, transit and bike

lanes? If so, how would pricier ride sharing services fit in? Lots of questions.

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