

Transportation

For public transit agencies losing riders, microtransit might be an answer

By **Luz Lazo** February 3

Declines in public transit ridership are pushing transportation agencies around the country, including in the District, to pursue partnerships with tech companies to incorporate on-demand, dynamic shared rides into their services.

Proponents of “microtransit” say they could increase the reach of public transportation by extending travel options to underserved areas and into off-hour travel times when bus service is infrequent or nonexistent. Cities also are betting that subsidized microtransit could potentially lure back riders lost to popular app-based services, such as Uber and Lyft. They view it as a creative way to meet growing needs and balance costs.

“We can’t continue to spend huge sums of money on local bus service if it’s not being utilized as well as it should,” said Gabe Klein, a former transportation chief in the District and Chicago. “So how do you enhance local bus service to make it more useful to people in the age of on-demand modes? That is where microtransit comes in.”

In Washington, Los Angeles and Detroit, transportation officials are moving in that direction, calling the operation of flexible-route, on-demand microtransit a way to provide residents with better connections to fixed transit. In some cities, microtransit rides could be available as soon as spring while others are already in the experimentation phase.

The surge in “Uber-for-buses” variations in major metropolitan areas has given public transportation agencies a point of reference, although the concept remains one of trial and error.

For the most part, microtransit has been a for-revenue service catering to commuters willing to pay more to travel more comfortably. But the services haven’t always lived up to their promise. Data-driven, pop-up transit services — such as the now-defunct Boston-based Bridj — have failed to generate the ridership to be self-sustainable. Transit advocates say this proves that it is difficult to make it in the business of transportation without public subsidies.

Bridj launched in 2014 in Boston and a year later in the District, offering sleek 14-seat shuttle-bus rides on routes tailored to meet the travel patterns of its customers. Shuttles were equipped with free WiFi to entice the professional commuter. But while

the service was deemed successful among users, the company could not build a sustainable business model and shut down abruptly last year.

Other companies, such as San Francisco-based Chariot and New York-based Via, are expanding into other cities, although in some areas as part of private-public partnerships.

Transit experts and officials say transit agencies can learn from the private-sector experience, and pursue the partnerships to improve their service and make it more customer-focused. Recent declines in bus and rail ridership nationwide have given regional transit systems a greater sense of urgency for the need to experiment with technology.

“People’s expectations for transportation are changing,” said Joshua Schank, chief innovation officer at Los Angeles County Metro’s Office of Extraordinary Innovation. “Public transportation has to figure out how to accommodate the new expectations in a way that we improve service for existing customers and attract new customers.”

Besides, he said, transit users want the app-based services that have transformed the way people travel.

“We want to provide some kind of on-demand transit service that is affordable, that anyone can use regardless of income, regardless if you have a bank account or a cellphone,” Schank said.

It all comes down to expanding services and keeping them accessible and affordable. Generally, cities are implementing systems that may rely on vehicles larger than a personal automobile, but smaller than a city bus, as well as routes that can be adjusted based on where passengers are located and where they need to go.

In the nation’s capital, officials envision a microtransit system that touches all quadrants of the city, building on a two-year-old program called Neighborhood Ride Service by Taxis, which was started to eliminate mobility barriers in transportation deserts. Through that program, officials say, they have found a need for transportation in areas with a concentration of seniors. There is also a need among night-shift workers who are often left behind by crowded buses during the city’s second night rush, when service workers start leaving restaurants and retail stores after 10 p.m. Many are willing to pay an extra dollar or so to get a safe ride home.

“It is convenient. It leaves you closer to the house, and you always get a seat,” said Beth Ward, a Howard University Hospital worker who takes the neighborhood shuttle home on a regular basis.

Driver John Scott, 79, has built a clientele of commuters such as Ward who describe the service as the option between an Uber or taxi and the bus.

Scott, a veteran taxi driver, travels a five-mile stretch down Georgia Avenue NW in a van painted in the city’s official red and gray color scheme. Each night, he makes the run from Howard University Hospital near U Street to the Target on Eastern Avenue on the D.C.-Montgomery County line, stopping in between to pick up shoppers at the Walmart, and returning as late as midnight for the late-night workers along the corridor.

People can flag Scott just as they would a taxi or they can find him at any of the nine stops along the route. They can pay with cash or credit card. In the wider microtransit network city officials envision, rides could also be booked via an app or by calling a dispatch system.

Sometimes, Scott stops to tell people about the \$3.25 fare, but most riders have learned about it through word of mouth or from fliers at beauty shops, community centers and libraries. Some regulars call him to schedule pickup times and others, such as Ward, know just where to find him.

“Is there room for me today?” Ward said on a recent evening before jumping in the minivan. Two other hospital workers were already on board and soon on their way home, with limited stops along one of Washington’s busiest corridors. The ride, Ward said, gives her peace of mind. She doesn’t have to run along a dark stretch of Georgia Avenue after work to catch a crowded bus that may or may not show up.

The service has become an alternative to the Metrobus 70 line, which isn’t as frequent after midnight. And, if their home is near Georgia Avenue, Scott drops passengers off right at their door.

The D.C. Department of For-Hire Vehicles, which launched the neighborhood rides in partnership with Transco, a local taxi company, and with grant money that paid for the vehicles, is preparing to expand the service as early as spring, serving other corners of the city.

“There are pockets around the city where [transit] service is not where it needs to be,” said Ernest Chrappah, who as the department’s director has led program. Those pockets are in areas where there’s no Metro, and where bus frequency isn’t what residents have come to expect.

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, which operates Metrorail and Metrobus, also is exploring microtransit opportunities, although officials say there are no immediate plans to implement any services.

“While microtransit cannot match the efficiency of frequent transit in urban areas, it may offer opportunities to serve low-density or off-hour travel markets more cost-effectively than with regular bus service,” spokeswoman Sherri Ly said. Typically, that would be seen as a potential replacement on routes with a maximum of 200 to 300 passengers per day, which is below the agency’s lowest ridership routes.

In Detroit, where the transit system is recovering from the bankruptcy crisis of 2013 and 2014, officials say the city cannot afford to provide frequent **bus** service to all corners of the city. In partnership with Lyft, the city is about to launch subsidized rides for first- and last-mile trips during overnight hours when fixed routes are less frequent, and in areas where there is low density but still demand for transit.

“In a perfect world where money was no option, we would put fixed-route service everywhere. But that’s not the case that we have,” said Mark de la Vergne, Detroit’s chief mobility officer. “What we are interested in is creating a seamless system for our customers.”

Los Angeles County officials say they hope to supplement the services the agency already runs. One goal, officials say, is to give existing customers a better trip; the other is to win over people who avoid public transportation because it is not as convenient as they want it to be.

“Maybe this option provides something that makes them switch,” Schank said.

But transportation officials acknowledge it may take them a few tries to find the right fit. Each city needs a microtransit solution tailored to its needs, said Rahul Kumar, vice president of revenue at TransLoc, a North Carolina-based tech company that works with transit agencies and cities to provide predictive models to simulate rider demand and fleet operations. In each market, TransLoc dives into local data to understand what riders want, determine what corridors may benefit from the service, and what type of vehicles might be most appropriate to use.

As many as 24 transit agencies are expected to launch microtransit this year, experts say. And more may be joining as cities continue to look at innovations in transportation.

“If they can provide people a better service at a lower cost, and it’s more equitable, what’s not to like?” said Klein, the former D.C. and Chicago transportation chief.

 **13 Comments**

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