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JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

Public Transit Agencies Take a Lesson From Uber

With on-demand transportation services growing, cities need to adapt. Some are doing just that.



Cap Metro, the city transit agency in Austin, Texas, has begun offering rides on demand via Pickup smartphone app. PHOTO: BRANDON GUIDRY/CAPITAL METRO

By *Tomio Geron*

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Starting this month, commuters in Austin, Texas, can open a smartphone app and order a shared ride with the tap of a button—not from Uber or Lyft but from the city’s transit agency.

The new service is part of a broader move by public transit agencies to make their systems more convenient and attractive to people who are used to being able to hail a car with the push of a button. In an era when ride-sharing services offer convenience, speed and trip-planning information, transit agencies are trying to catch up.

These efforts include offering their own on-demand transportation services, joining with private transit services to give customers more options for getting around, adding apps that help riders plan trips across public and private transit, and making it easier to pay on mobile apps.

Transit agencies have no choice: With the growth of Uber and Lyft, people may be using those services instead of public transit in some cases, says Zak Accuardi, program analyst at TransitCenter, a New York-based foundation that supports public transit across the country. A 2016 study of eight metropolitan areas by the Transit Cooperative Research Program sponsored by the Federal Transit Administration found that 15% of people whose top transit mode is Uber or Lyft would use public transit instead if Uber and Lyft weren’t available.

“We like to say this is not your grandfather’s bus system,” says Dan Dawson, vice president of marketing and communications at Austin’s Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority, or Cap Metro. “We can’t operate the same way we did 50 years ago and expect to be relevant. We have to use technology and new types of transit to both entice and provide the type of experience our customers want.”

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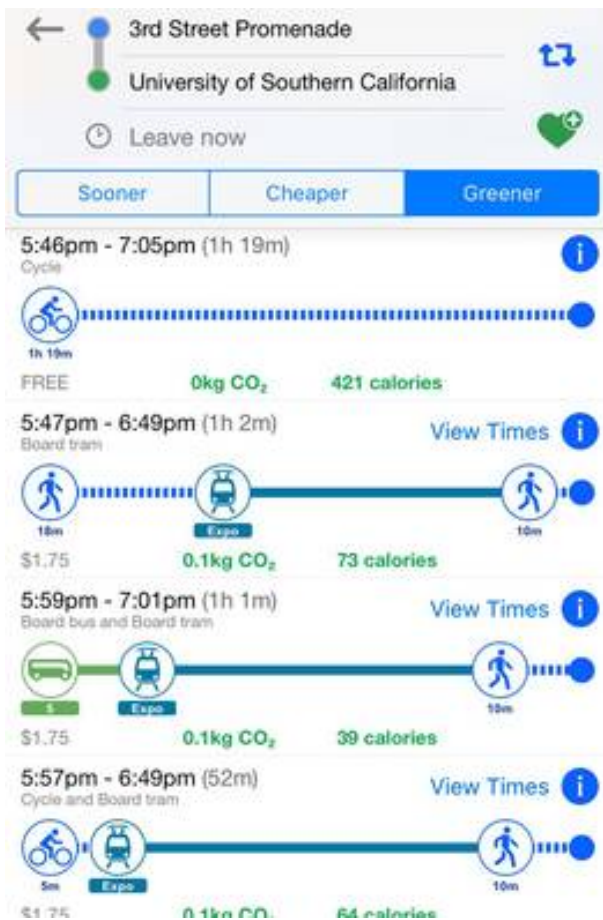
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Cap Metro rolled out a test of an on-demand shared van service this month, using an app designed for Austin by Via Transportation Inc., a New York-based company that also has created versions of its Pickup app operated by local private partners in Paris and in the U.K. county of Kent. Similar services are sprouting across the U.S., with local twists, as cities work with various app developers.

The transit agency in Nashville, Tenn., working with TransLoc Inc., is testing an on-demand van service that takes riders crosstown, a trip that has less fixed-line public transit service than

other routes. TransLoc, of Durham, N.C., provides software that routes the vans to the riders on the most efficient path. In King County, Wash., where Seattle is located, the metro system's TripPool service provides vans private citizens can use to commute to and from park-and-ride lots or transit centers, picking up passengers along the way who request rides through an app from iCarpool.



The Go LA app culls information on many different modes of transit and lets users filter their options by what is quickest, cheapest or greenest. PHOTO: GOLLA

Some cities are working with Lyft and Uber. Transit agencies in Centennial, Colo., and in the California cities of Dublin and San Clemente have formed partnerships with Lyft to offer subsidized or free Lyft service—to train stations or other destinations—in areas where it isn't efficient to run fixed-line bus or train routes because the population is less dense. Los Angeles's LA Metro and Seattle's regional Sound Transit system in 2016 received a federal grant to test a

program of discounted Lyft rides to and from transit stations. Uber has similar partnerships in Pinellas Park, Fla., Summit, N.J., and elsewhere to connect riders with transit.

In addition to connecting commuters with mass transit and providing service in underserved areas, these services are helping reduce the need to build parking lots for people who drive themselves to transit stops.

Providing easier ways to get around town can make a difference for many residents. A 2014 study by professors at the University of Southern California found that residents in San Diego who could drive 30 minutes to work could get access to about 32 times more jobs than those making a 30-minute commute by mass transit.

Some cities are helping residents integrate ride-sharing services into trip planning, with apps that allow users to plug in a destination and get various public or private travel options—and the best combinations.

Los Angeles’s Go LA app presents train, bus, bike, Lyft and other options. For example, a commuter looking to go from Santa Monica to USC would find options including Zipcar, train service, a Lyft ride to a train, and a ride to a bus on a bike. Riders can choose the fastest, cheapest or greenest option. Conduent Inc. built the app, as well as a similar app for Denver.

“We want to give Angelenos multiple transportation options,” says Bruce Gillman, spokesman for the city’s Transportation Department. “No one is just a cyclist, driver or rider. We’re some of those people at all different times.”

Portland, Ore.’s TriMet system, which has a trip-planner app that includes biking and walking options in addition to mass transit, has received a U.S. Transportation Department grant to integrate ride services such as Uber and Lyft. In the Research Triangle area of North Carolina, riders using TransLoc’s Rider app can see trip options that include a bus and then an Uber, and can click to request the Uber ride. And Austin’s Cap Metro is working on expanding its trip-planning apps to show commuters options including public transit, bike sharing, car sharing and ride sharing.

“For Cap Metro and probably other transit agencies, this is a real paradigm shift—not looking at ourselves as a bus or rail company anymore.” says Joe Iannello, vice president and chief information officer at Cap Metro. “We have to look at ourselves as a transportation provider. That means all kinds of transportation.”

The next step: one payment for every mode of transportation. MaaS Global Ltd. in Helsinki offers an app that enables users to pay a flat monthly fee for seamless access to a range of private and public transit options, including bus, train, taxi and rental bike. In the U.S., agencies in Austin, Portland and other cities are working on technology that will eventually allow residents to pay once for access to many different kinds of public and private transportation systems.

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Meanwhile, many agencies now offer the ability to buy rides or monthly passes on a mobile app and use the app to get on buses or trains. The Regional Transportation Commission of Nevada’s Washoe County, which includes Reno, rolled out a mobile app from San Francisco-based Token Transit Inc. in December that allows people to show a changing daily bus pass to the driver for rides. After four

months, 4% of the system’s riders are using the app and 6% of all bus passes are digital, says Ed Park, project manager at the commission. “We’ve been pleasantly surprised by how quickly people adopted it,” he says.

Big transit agencies such as Miami-Dade County's are also aiming to make payments easier by adding mobile apps. The county rolled out a mobile app in October for riders to use a one-day mobile bus pass and will soon add monthly passes. The app, built by Cubic Transportation Systems Inc., which also provides systems for the San Francisco Bay Area, London and Chicago, is expected to add near-field communication technology next year, which will enable riders to wave their phones to board buses, says Alice Bravo, director of transportation and public works for Miami-Dade County.

That ability offers several advantages. There's no risk of the bus driver being tricked by a fake or outdated pass. And because the bus driver doesn't have to visually verify each person's pass, boarding could be faster, especially since passengers could board through both the front and rear doors.

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