



Public Transit and Mobility in the US: Can They Come Together?



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November 4-5, 2019

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7-9 Fashion Street, London, E1 6PX

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Introduction

For the past century, as European cities developed around a rich public transport system, American personal mobility was built upon a foundation of private cars that now clog streets and the air, while leaving the carless with expensive and lengthy trips on buses that share the same clogged streets.

In theory, shared, on-demand and even autonomous mobility promise to reduce the number of vehicles on the congested road networks, cleaning the air and making people's travel easier.

So far, shared and on-demand mostly amounts to ride-hailing services that seem to increase congestion while siphoning some consumers away from public transportation.

There's a growing realisation that the future of mobility in North America can't be limited to the flavour of mobility currently offered by TNCs. Public transit must be reinvented as part of an intermodal mix, with a focus on the integration of public and private transportation and, ideally, the blurring of the lines between the two.

In order to achieve this, public transit needs investment on a level never previously seen. This will be difficult to accomplish for four reasons: The slow workings of government; the burden of Federal, state, county and local regulations; chronic underfunding leading to poor maintenance and outdated systems; and resistance to increased taxation in a culture in which many people believe subsidizing public transportation is a kind of welfare.

When it comes to collaboration between public transit operators, smarter cities and independent mobility providers, aside from organizational issues, there's an almost complete lack of data that can be shared to facilitate the operations of an optimized and integrated mobility network. (For more on this, read our white paper, [Smart Cities - Embracing the Urban Data Economy](#).)

Finally, despite the successes of public transportation in Europe and Asia, as well as a few bright spots in the United States, the many failed or underperforming transit projects here give ammunition to naysayers.

Americans certainly will get out of their cars and take public transportation, but only if it's as clean, safe, pleasant, convenient and affordable as their cars.

The convenience aspect includes being able to access transit without driving. While there are some U.S. transit systems, such as New York City's, where transit is a few blocks away for most people, many systems are looking to third parties to provide first- and last-mile options.

The reinvention of transit will be very slow and mostly incremental. This report looks at successes, barriers and tactics to putting public transportation at the center of mobility.

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Innovation in Public Transportation

Sometimes, big innovation is very simple.

Bicycle- and scooter-sharing services and partnerships with Lyft are the early wins for multi-modal.

On the Capitol Corridor, an intercity passenger rail service connecting Silicon Valley/San Jose and the Sacramento region, bike-and-ride has grown, with 13 percent of passengers getting to the train via bicycle. A survey showed that 80 percent of people who biked to the station needed the bike at the other end, as well.

Jim Allison, manager of planning for the Capitol Corridor Joint Powers Authority, thinks that's in part due to the area's nice riding conditions plus trains that had space for bikes. The authority has responded to demand by reconfiguring some cars as bicycle cars.

"This helps retain loyal ridership, and then, people are not taking up a parking spot," Allison says.

Some Capital Corridor stations now have electric lockers to store bikes, and the authority is encouraging bicycle-sharing services at stations. Although it hasn't partnered directly with bike-share companies, the City of Davis has a robust program with JUMP that serves the train station.

The Solano Transportation Authority, with stops on the Capital Corridor, is testing a program that provides discounted train tickets and free Lyft connections from two stations to employers.

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“Anything that adds that last-mile connection is a great marriage”

Jim Allison, Manager of Planning, **Capitol Corridor Joint Powers Authority**

“Anything that adds that last-mile connection is a great marriage,” Allison says.

A multimodal OS

Columbus, Ohio, recipient of grants from the Paul G. Allen Foundation and the 2017 Smart City Challenge, is thinking big with its Federal money, building an open-source data platform called the Columbus Smart City Operating System. Version 2.0 was recently released.

“The Operating System is the heartbeat,” says Mandy Bishop, Smart Columbus program manager. Her team is working on seven applications that will feed data into the Operating System, including a multimodal trip-planning app that will allow people to plan, reserve and pay for trips across transport options, as well as a tool for connecting mothers with non-emergency medical transportation and one to help people with cognitive impairment to use public transit.

Bishop says this integration is challenging and rewarding. The planner is built on OpenTripPlanner, a family of open-source projects, with a common payments system using Siemens Mobility. The Columbus team is handling the customization necessary to integrate with the payment engines of the various mobility vendors, rather than asking each of them to do it.

That’s because the Central Ohio Transit Authority aims to leverage such investments for its future mobility strategy.

Says Bishop, “If you look at transit agencies that are successful in positioning themselves for the future, they are looking to be the voice of regional mobility and regional mobility coordination. Smart Columbus is a facilitator that is going to help add the technology component to make that happen.”

Smart Columbus hasn’t determined what the Operating System might ultimately evolve to. In theory, Bishop says, it could operate as a data exchange among multiple public and private entities. Another stage might allow entrepreneurs to access the data and build tools on top of it. The grant runs for two more years and, Bishop says, the whole vision has not been articulated yet.

“Our definite goal is to get city data into the Operating System and working toward looking into how it can serve as a community resource to spur solving social issues,” she says. “We talk a lot about the technology, but it’s the people behind the technology that matter. My team is invested in making people’s lives better.”

Demand Responsive Transit

So many startups aim to provide last-mile transportation—and most or all of them are losing money.

Ford shut down its bus-on-demand Chariot service, saying it had learned enough. GM cut Maven in half to focus on the usual-suspect cities where demand was strongest.

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“They’re trying to make as much money on products they’re selling today to have money to invest in these future ventures”

Michelle Krebs, Senior Analyst, **AutoTrader**

Daimler and BMW created a joint venture merging their respective services for car sharing, ride hailing, parking and payments under the brand Share Now. The companies’ announcement said, “By joining forces, we can focus on what really matters—innovation, growth, and creating a seamless mobility experience.”

The JV also spreads the money-losing pain around, something that’s become crucial for OEMs as their core business of auto sales slows.

“We’re facing a potential downturn in the auto industry. Sales are already dipping here and have dropped quite a bit in China,” explains Michelle Krebs, senior analyst at AutoTrader. “They’re trying to make as much money on products they’re selling today to have money to invest in these future ventures. But the ones that they don’t see a clear path to getting some return on in short order will be cut.”

One thing Ford might have learned is that on-demand transportation needs to be just that.

What Chariot brought to the mobility table, according to Jeremy Acevedo, a manager of industry analysis at Edmunds, “rigid in a time when mobility demands flexibility. The routes were rigid and limited, and they didn’t address last-mile needs. It was not that huge step you’d want to see on either cents per mile or better commuting.”

Acevedo doesn’t discount the importance of such experiments, however. “It’s a start-up mentality. These quick starts and quick fails are important to understanding which ideas are getting traction. It’s important to pull the plug on things in a viable timeframe,” he says.

For years, automakers have talked about becoming mobility providers, with autonomy as a crucial element. Says Acevedo, “In 2019, it does seem farfetched there would be on-demand fleets of robo-taxis fulfilling needs [in suburbs], but automakers are putting out numbers that are compelling. Automakers have assured us it’s a model that can def speak to a vast majority of America.”

The vision for demand-responsive transit is virtual bus stops and dynamically routed vehicles in real time to create efficient, shared trips. But the weak point in this vision is still demand. Centuries of habit directs transit riders to fixed stops, while it’s extremely difficult to make on-demand work in suburban areas.

Transit agencies experimenting with replacing bus routes with on-demand bus service have found they were able to provide better and more convenient service in some cases, says Christof Spieler, vice president and director of planning at consulting firm Huitt-Zollars and author of the book *Trains, Buses, People*. “But they got less efficiency out of it in terms of the number of people carried per hour. It may make sense in some places, but ... one of the things that makes transit so efficient is that it puts lots of people in one vehicle.”

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"It's a benefit for groups that normally can't use those types of services: people with disabilities, without a smart phone, low income"

Joshua Schank, Chief
Innovation Officer, **LA
County Metropolitan
Transportation Authority**

ViaVan serves LA

But the idea of on-demand transit is far from dead. The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority is seven months into a one-year pilot with ViaVan, a shared ride-hailing service. ViaVan provides shuttle service to three LA Metro stations, and anyone within a defined zone around the stations can take Via at the same cost as a subway or bus ride.

"It's a benefit for groups that normally can't use those types of services: people with disabilities, without a smart phone, low income," explains Joshua Schank, chief innovation officer in the Office of Extraordinary Innovation within the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority. (People can book rides through a call center, as well as through mobile phones.)

To make this work, ViaVan agreed to share the risk of the pilot, contributing funds that it won't recoup unless it carries a predetermined number of riders. Says Schank, "Chariot was largely a private enterprise seeking to make a profit off transportation. That's not a realistic bus mod. This is a partnership where both sides contribute."

The pilot, which can be extended for a second year, will determine whether the benefits to the public are worth the expenditure.

When it comes to that last mile, Lyft and Uber partner with transit agencies to provide discounted or even free fares to and from transit stations. Of course, both services are bleeding money.

Last-mile services must be a supplement to public transit rather than a replacement, according to AutoTrader's Krebs. She doubts whether they'll become profitable. "They're great ideas, but commercialization is as big a challenge as the technical part. We do think there will be transformation in mobility at some point, but we are not near a tipping point, because they haven't figured out how such a company makes money."

On the other hand, the idea that transit should be profit-making is a canard, according to public transit officials. LA's ViaVan program must be subsidized; it's funded in part by a Federal grant and in part by LA Metro. "That's the kind of cost the public sector is supposed to bear," Schank adds.

Focus on service goals, not revenue

While ViaVan's on-demand service uses drivers' personal vehicles for shared rides, like UberPool and Lyft Line, its model is to reduce the number of its vehicles on the road while encouraging riders to walk to virtual bus stops along optimized routes.

"Our business model depends on as many people sharing ride as possible, so we have very aligned incentives with cities," says ViaVan CEO Chris Snyder.

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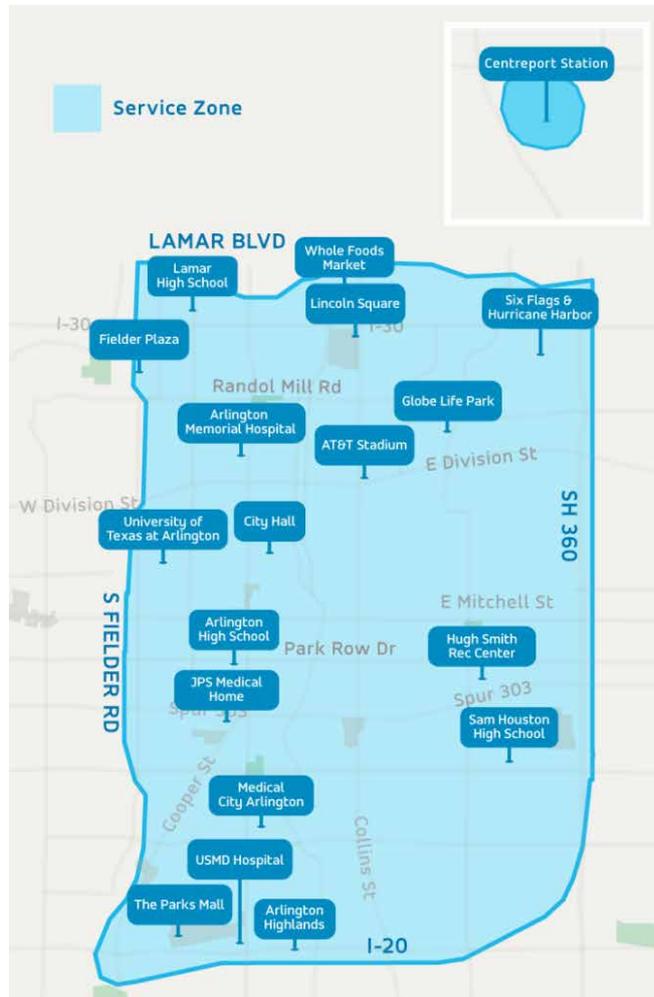
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Chris Snyder, CEO, **ViaVan**



In Arlington, Tex., it operates Via Arlington on behalf of the city. Three-dollar rides are available Monday through Saturday over 40 to 50 percent of the city. Snyder says the service area was determined by the city.

“The city is our customer,” Snyder says. “What they want to achieve is the first priority.”

 [Can on-demand buses ever be a thing? And who should pay? Cities, private enterprise or public/private partnerships? @ViaVan #public-transport #mobility](#)

Blurring the Lines Between Public and Private

Another ideal: Transit becomes like the supermarket—plenty of variety and everything you need in one place, and one easy checkout. We know the reality.

In the United States, public transit options themselves, as well as newer mobility services, are disconnected in terms of schedules, mapping and fares. In the positive and rare example, San Francisco metro area, riders can

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use the same transit card to pay for the Bay Area Rapid Transit heavy rail system, San Francisco's underground MUNI system and buses throughout the area.

Unified fares are an important convenience, but trip planning may still depend on accessing multiple websites or apps to find schedules for different public transit options. And, in a great many cases, a bus route that goes to a rail station, for example, may not match up with the train schedule.

Even Northern California's Capital Corridor, an intercity passenger rail service that operates between Silicon Valley/San Jose and the Sacramento region, hasn't integrated its fares or schedules. The system is run by the Capital Corridor Joint Powers Authority (CCJPA) with subsidies from the state. With six local transit agencies in eight counties participating, data quality and standardization so far have blocked unification of information or fares.

Says Jim Allison, manager of planning, Capitol Corridor Joint Powers Authority, "There are gaps in payments and trip planning, and all the data that underlies all that is in varying levels of quality." If only one area of the state has poor-quality data, the chain of information is broken.

The California Integrated Travel Project aims to fix all this. "One thing we're planning for in California is a better integrated, networked passenger rail system that will be easier to use for the public. We hope it will be more top of mind for people to use rail or combine rail with different first mile and last mile options," Allison says.

The next step would be to publish fare and schedule information so that other mobility providers could consume it.

Ideally, Allison says, "Rail becomes a bridge between communities. When you couple it with first- and last-mile transportation, and it's all integrated, we will be able to reduce energy use and increase a sense of community."



What's the best model for public/private partnerships between #publictransport operators and #mobility providers?

Public/private Partnerships: Jugglers Needed

Mobility startups have certainly disrupted transportation, not always for the better. They can be valuable partners, enabling last-mile journeys, especially to rail and underground systems.

"They do hinder take-up of public transportation," says Jeremy Acevedo, a manager of industry analysis at Edmunds. "However, they're attempting to facilitate people getting to their final destinations from wherever public transportation takes them."

When forging partnerships with private companies, public transit operators have to content with higher government entities while looking for a deal that works for them and potential partners.

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“It’s not necessarily the data sharing that’s holding companies back. It’s more us requiring that they can’t just put them wherever they want”

Gary Halbert, City Manager,
Chula Vista

For example, the City of Chula Vista created a set of requirements for micro-mobility pilots within the city. One project, designed to serve people who can’t or won’t ride bikes or scooters, would provide small, shared electric vehicles, like golf carts, for residents of the east side.

The idea is that these micro-vehicles could run on paved pedestrian paths, bike lanes and roads with lower speed limits. In order to implement this, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), the regional planning agency, worked with the city to get new state legislation passed allowing the EVs to do this.

On the private end, cities in the region don’t have enough information on potential usage of and revenue from third-party mobility providers. Chula Vista requires that mobility providers place a certain percentage of shared bikes or scooters into underserved parts of town, as well as at stops along the new bus rapid transit system. It also requires providers to share data from the services, which would be shared with SANDAG.

So far, only one provider has been interested.

Says Gary Halbert, Chula Vista’s city manager, “It’s not necessarily the data sharing that’s holding companies back. It’s more us requiring that they can’t just put them wherever they want. They need to be spread around.”

Bike/scooter share companies understand what kinds of situations will be most lucrative, and it would be so easy to focus on those, because they can better project revenue. Halbert has found that these companies prefer to pay the city a flat rate per trip, so that, if the service is underutilized, they only bear the cost of their infrastructure.

Halbert has a good handle on what his administrative costs would be: around \$35,000 a year—and he’d like to cover that, if possible, so he prefers an annual fee per unit. He’s not averse to a per-device deal, but he would need data to support whatever that fee was.

“It’s just a risk thing,” Halbert says, “and neither party really knows the potential revenue.”

Layers of regulation

It’s not only business models that hinder cities in working with startups. Chattanooga, Tenn., has a smart-city initiative that includes a partnership with the Tennessee Valley Authority for car sharing, a city-run bike sharing service and, incidentally, a 20-year old free, electric bus shuttle serving downtown.

“The primary barrier is regulatory-type stuff,” says Kevin Comstock, smart city director for the City of Chattanooga.

As a local government agency, it typically requires outside funding, for example, from the U.S. Dept. of Transportation, as well as the state DOT.

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“That took our basic \$2.5 million project and shot it up to \$8 million. And for something that had been primarily a technology project, now have to do all this construction stuff, too”

Kevin Comstock, Smart City Director, **City of Chattanooga**

Chattanooga’s Transit Signal Prioritization Project is designed to speed up bus service on one of the most heavily used routes that serve an underrepresented portion of the community.

Chattanooga applied for Federal funds five years ago. The funds were granted and it began working toward implementation. Then, late in 2018, the State of Tennessee advised the city that it needed to include ADA-compliant infrastructure. According to Comstock, this was the first time the state had added accessibility requirements into what was a technology project.

“That took our basic \$2.5 million project and shot it up to \$8 million. And for something that had been primarily a technology project, now have to do all this construction stuff, too,” Comstock says. It will be up to the Tennessee DOT to find the extra funds.

“It’s a game we have to play,” Comstock says.

Columbus businesses lead partnership

Columbus, Ohio won 2016’s U.S. Smart City Challenge as much for its business model as for technological aspirations. Its secret weapon was the Columbus Partnership, a membership organization for local CEOs founded in 2002.

Columbus Partnership swiftly gathered \$90 million in pledges over the four-year period of the grant, bringing together businesses, city entities, two energy providers, Nationwide Insurance, Ohio State University and the private tech education provider Singularity University, and Paul G. Allen’s Vulcan.

Since winning the challenge, Columbus Partnership has continued to fund-raise, bringing in a reported total of more than \$500 million for a variety of projects, from installing EV charging centers to creating the Smart Columbus Experience Center.

This isn’t the first example of this kind of broad collaboration. A Harvard Business School case dubbed the Partnership’s ability to engage multiple entities to cooperate for the common good “The Columbus Way.”

When the Smart City Challenge Came Up, the Columbus Partnership had the connections, tools and relationships to respond quickly and brilliantly.

The message for other cities that aim to become smarter is clear: Don’t wait for a big project, large grant or shiny new technology to get started. Build relationships now, across the board, to be ready for when opportunity comes.



In #publictransport, public/private partnerships need to balance profit and public good. @PubPrivStrat

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Luring Drivers Away from Their Cars

The mythos of the car as a freedom machine may be baked into American culture, but it's not necessarily true that Americans are that different from the rest of the world in their love of cars. Nor, it might be, in their willingness to take public transportation—if it were only as good as Europe's.

It's no myth that transit ridership overall is shrinking. According to Transit Center, in 2018, in most cities, fewer people rode buses and trains than the year before.

Seattle is the transit star, but, oddly enough, public transit ridership is growing in some of the most sprawling cities: Pittsburgh, Houston, Austin, San Antonio, Detroit, and Las Vegas.

You might think that's because it's easy to go from little to a little more, but the Transit Center explains it differently: buses. Each of those cities reworked bus lines and increased frequency and/or hours of service.

Says Jonathan English, a doctoral candidate at Columbia University who studies transit, "The key to great transit service is not about getting 100 percent of people to ride transit for 100 percent of trips. It's about giving people a viable choice of getting around without needing to drive."

English thinks one of the biggest barriers to better public transportation in the U.S. is the belief of planners and city officials that because current ridership is low, there is no demand. "We're not providing a service that will attract riders, instead, we're waiting for riders to materialize." He notes it may take as long as a couple of years for citizens to spread the word that taking a bus or train is pleasant reliable.

Another barrier is a misguided focus on getting big grants for light rail projects without including transport to stations. "They may spend a couple billion dollars to connect two points in an enormous metro area, but probably it's useless for 95 percent of metro area. They're not working on the basics: make a bus show up past somebody's house on the weekend."

Christof Spieler, vice president and director of planning at consulting firm Huitt-Zollars and author of the book *Trains, Buses, People*, agrees that ridership follows quality transit. He identifies another, less tractable issue in the States: land-use decisions made in the last century.

"The single most important element of transit ridership is population density," Spieler says. "The more people who live within walking distance of transit, the more will ride it."

Anyone's ability to use public transit depends on whether where they live and work was built in such a way that it can be served, Spieler says. For example, it may not be possible for someone to walk from a bus stop into his office in a large office park.

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“As soon as you get into a world where the transit route you are riding is not able to get you close enough to your destination that you don’t have to get into another vehicle, you are making a transit service that is less useful and efficient,” he says.

That’s where last-mile services play a role, but he doesn’t think making up for bad land-use decisions with new technology is the ultimate solution. “They will not replace high-occupancy, fixed-route transit,” Spieler says.

Besides, he adds, “The most efficient last-mile technology ever developed is the sidewalk.”

Usability: the ultimate incentive

Usability is a prime concern in the world of software and mobile apps, but it’s not a term you hear in the transit world. Convenience is a proxy: the ability for people to easily get where they need to go when they want to get there and at a reasonable cost. True usability encompasses much more:

- Transit options suited to the culture and environment
- Multimodal, real-time schedules showing all transit options
- Online and mobile booking
- Multimodal fares that let you use the same card or ticket for multiple transit options
- Payment schemes that include cash, cards, online and mobile

Every city and neighborhood is different; for success, a mobility scheme must be suited to its social and built environment. The Shared-Use Mobility Center is a public-interest organization focused on shared mobility. It’s developed guidelines about the relationship between neighborhoods and transportation modes:

- Bikeshare works best as a first/last mile transportation strategy in mixed-use neighborhoods and near transit hubs in walkable corridors with high pedestrian traffic.
- Traditional carshare works best in dense neighborhoods with low auto ownership and high transit quality.
- One-way carshare works best as a first- and last-mile strategy in larger cities with progressive parking policies.
- Ride-hailing works best in walkable neighborhoods and in high- to moderate-density areas within large and mid-size cities.
- Private shuttles work best as last-mile connections to fixed rail for employment centers and in cities with bottlenecks in public transit.

Taxi service works best in large cities with large transportation hubs.

True usability—plenty of options with unified scheduling and payments, plus frequent, 24-hour service—is the only way to get Americans out of their private cars and into public transportation.

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Is the sidewalk the most efficient last-mile #publictransport technology? Can @Uber and @Lyft et al. scale to meet the public need?

Conclusion: To Put Public Transportation at the Center, Put It First

For startups eager to partner up with cities, it's important to note that for every smart city there are 50 that just aren't ready. Many transit experts see mobility services as technologies in search of applications, instead of important elements of overall mobility.

When it comes to ride hailing, "We exaggerate the need for last-mile services and their viability," says Jonathan English, a doctoral candidate at Columbia University who studies transit.

He points out that dial-a-ride services, where transit subsidizes cab rides, have existed for decades in suburban areas.

Instead, English believes more frequent, round-the-clock bus service is all that's necessary to serve most people. In the suburbs of Toronto, for example, the population density is so low that it doesn't seem to support bus service, yet busses run every five or ten minutes, and they're full. "Planners need to be made aware that transit can be viable even in seemingly unfriendly areas if you provide a good enough service upfront. Demand will never materialize if service is terrible."

And, without transit ridership, so-called last-mile services will instead continue to replace public transit altogether. The more independent transportation providers can collaborate with cities to achieve the city's goals, the closer we can get to an integrated transit system that serves everyone—and serves them well.

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