Can public transit and ride-share companies get along?

September 23 2016, by Kyle Shelton

Who's in the driver's seat? Credit: Matthew Jude Brown, Alexander Torrenegra, CC BY-SA

In Centennial, Colorado and Altamonte Springs, Florida, residents and visitors can now get subsidized rides to the nearest train station. In both cases the cities foot the bill, or at least part of it, but it's not a public bus that makes the trip. Rather, it's a car driven by someone working for ride-sharing companies Lyft and Uber.

There are potential public benefits – the hope of increased ridership, better service for hard-to-serve areas and cost and equipment efficiencies. Competition could push sometimes slow-moving transit agencies to innovate and improve.

There are also risks. Ride-sharing companies have [devastated](#) [the private taxi market](#), effectively undercutting the entire industry in some cities. [Mobility rights advocates](#) and [transit employees](#) fear the same thing could happen to [public transit](#), remaking, under private ownership, the way millions of Americans get around every day.

To maximize the benefits while minimizing the risks, we need to know how ride-share companies will affect public transportation. Might public transit agencies come to regret entering into agreements with private-sector competitors? Can the new arrangements improve service for customers, save agencies money and make a profit for the companies?

Filling the gaps

With [numerous pilot projects](#) similar to Centennial and Altamonte Springs just getting underway, there is little existing research into the effects that cooperating with ride-sharing companies will have on public transit operators.

But the role that ride-sharing companies are now playing is not a new one. Private companies have long found ways to fill transportation needs for people who do not own cars or who live in places where public transit does not reach – such as [Baltimore's hack cabs](#) or New York City's "[dollar vans](#)."

A ride-share company's smartphone app may be more formalized, but Uber and Lyft have tapped into a similar market as these informal transit systems. The companies [serve users unhappy with existing options](#) – either because public transit failed to serve them, other options cost too much or they deemed transit vehicles uncomfortable or unsafe.

Taking over from transit?

A future in which ride-sharing companies fully replace mass transit [is unlikely](). There are too many advantages built into existing systems. Buses and trains carry more people than cars and vans. The benefits of fixed transit lines – structured and stable development [corridors]() and [dedicated rights-of-way]() – are simply not replicable by ride-sharing companies. While Uber and Lyft will likely continue to grow, they are unlikely to draw riders off well-functioning transit lines. But [they can complement]() them.

A likely outcome of ride-share and authority interaction is more of what is already taking shape in Colorado, Florida and [many other locales]() – small-scale, replicable cooperation. Centennial and Altamonte Springs are attempting to address what is know in the transportation sector as the ["first mile/last mile"]() problem. The idea is that many potential transit riders don't use the service because it's too far from either the beginning or end of a given trip. Offering ride-sharing as a way to connect from the doorway to the transit stop may help overcome this issue.
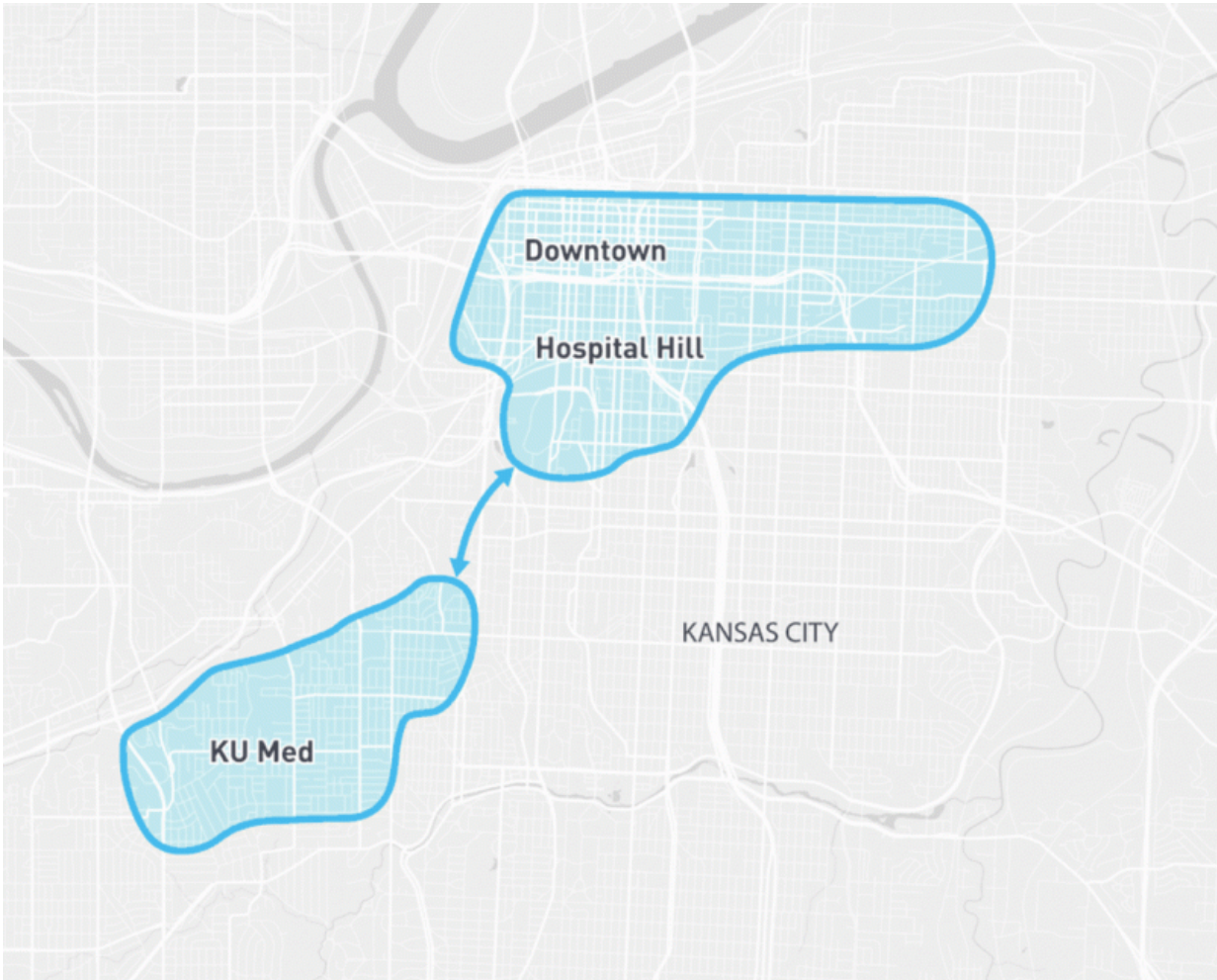
A new Bridj shuttle is expected to improve connections between residential areas and downtown Kansas City. Credit: KCATA

Bridj, a newer player to the ride-sharing world that styles itself as "pop-up" microtransit, is running a pilot project in Kansas City that intends to augment existing public transit service by making connections in ways existing buses do not. The company contracted with the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority in March 2016 to run on-demand shuttles between the downtown area and a pocket of residential areas southwest of the city during peak hours.

While both areas are served by regular KCATA bus routes, they are not directly connected, so private vehicles are much faster. Instead of changing the existing bus routes or adding new ones, KCATA is hoping Bridj service can more cheaply cover the gap.

Identifying risks

The biggest question about these new relationships is how well they meet riders' needs over time. Disability rights advocates have already warned that substituting ride-share services for existing agency-run paratransit programs – on-demand rides for users with disabilities – may be a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Public agencies and most private transportation companies are bound to provide these services to all users, but it's not yet clear whether newer ride-sharing companies must also – or how contracting with a government agency might require it.

The technology gap faced by many users represents another major challenge. For as common as smartphones and internet access have become, many low-income riders do not have access to these technologies or to the tech-enabled transit they make available. Ride-sharing companies are trying to address this challenge: Uber is testing a call-in dispatch program in Pinellas Park, Florida, for riders without smartphones.

Nevertheless, these public-private partnerships threaten to further perceptions that ride-sharing companies cater mainly to higher-income users. Public authorities should be on guard against creating a two-tiered transit system in which how riders travel depends on the technology they own.

An additional risk is that agencies could overcommit to approaches that fail. Ride-share companies are more nimble; they have no set routes and

far fewer equipment and overhead costs. They are free to pursue routes and partnerships that make money and abandon those that do not. Public agencies must ensure that they – and their riders – are not left immobile if ride-share companies pull out.

Some failure is certain

Agencies should carefully monitor in-progress experiments for effectiveness before committing significant financial resources to new programs. Agencies must also retain flexibility to try other approaches when some pilots do, inevitably, fail.

One of the best ways to track the success of pilots is for the ride-share companies to share data with agencies, the public and researchers. Up to now the opposite has been true – when making agreements to allow their drivers to operate in New York and San Francisco, ride-sharing companies refused to share ridership data. Public agencies should insist that companies share data on operations and ridership – pick-up and drop-off locations, cost, duration, maybe even demographics of riders – as a prerequisite to any agreement. These data would help agencies make informed choices about moving forward with these partnerships.

A final caveat regarding these partnerships is their potential to inform choices about public transportation funding. Successful public-private initiatives might give leverage to critics calling for reductions in mass transportation funding. It is critical that positive partnerships not justify cuts to relatively meager public transportation budgets. The core elements of most public transit systems are in desperate need of repair and are vastly underfunded in comparison to roads, which have their fair share of maintenance needs. In a world where mobility modes are more closely tied into a single system, the maintenance of transit will be essential.

In many ways these ride-share agency operations represent a version of the transportation system of the future: a [coherent network](link) that operates across public and private systems and modes. But, if we are to achieve that future in an equitable and effective way, these partnerships must be executed in a careful, cooperative and accountable manner.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](link). *Read the* [original article](link).

Source: The Conversation

Citation: Can public transit and ride-share companies get along? (2016, September 23) retrieved 28 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2016-09-transit-ride-share-companies.html