



Don't Blame Ridesharing for Mass Transit's Woes

Randal O'Toole

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Last week, a transportation consultant named Bruce Schaller published a report claiming that ride-hailing was increasing traffic congestion. Since then, we've been inundated with wild claims Uber and Lyft were increasing traffic by 180 percent, and these claims are used to support arguments that cities should tax companies like Uber and Lyft and use the revenues to compensate transit agencies for the riders lost to ridesharing.

Inaccurate Congestion Claims

Yet, the congestion claims are completely inaccurate. Schaller concluded that, because well under half of ride-hailing trips would otherwise have used private automobiles, ride-hailing put "2.8 new vehicle miles on the road for each mile of personal driving removed." He went on to say that this is "an overall 180 percent increase in driving on city streets," but that would be true only if ride-hailing removed 100 percent of private driving from the streets.

The report also said that ride-hailing added "5.7 billion miles of driving annually in the Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle and Washington DC metro areas." That sounds like a lot, but Federal Highway Administration data show that it is only about 1 percent of driving in those metro areas. Since, by Schaller's estimation, about a third of ride-sharing travel displaced private auto travel, ride-hailing added a net of just two-thirds of a percent of driving in those metro areas.

Nor does even that two-thirds of a percent necessarily add to congestion. A disproportionate share of ride-hailing takes place during off-peak hours, so only a small portion of that two-thirds of a percent actually contributed to rush-hour congestion.

Public Transit Is Not a Cure-All

Aside from being arithmetically challenged, Schaller is an unabashed opponent of auto driving. "Cities need less driving, not more," he says, claiming that cities that allow too much auto driving will be "drained of the density and diversity which are indispensable to their economic

and social well-being.” The reality is that low-density cities that emphasize driving, such as Dallas and Houston, tend to be more affordable and more socially and economically diverse than high-density cities that emphasize transit such as New York and San Francisco.

To promote transit and limit driving, Schaller advocates imposing fees on Uber and Lyft of as much as \$50 per hour. Cities that are already charging such fees (though less than \$50 an hour) are using them to compensate transit agencies that have lost riders to ridesharing, a policy Schaller would applaud but one that makes as much sense as taxing pocket calculators to save the slide rule industry.

Only transit, says the report, can “make possible dense urban centers with lively, walkable downtowns; a rich selection of jobs, restaurants, entertainment and other activities; diversity of population; and intensive and inventive face-to-face interactions that make cities fertile grounds for business and artistic innovation.” Has New York City resident Schaller ever been to Silicon Valley? It doesn’t have a dense urban center and it’s transit system carries less than 5 percent of commuters to work and only about 1 percent of local passenger travel. Yet it is one of the most creative and innovative places on earth.

The reality is that the ride-hailing industry is threatening the transit industry, and transit advocates are demonizing Uber and Lyft in order to protect their \$50 billion in annual subsidies. Schaller’s report estimates that ride-hailing grew by 710 million trips in 2017, the same year that transit ridership declined by 255 million trips. If just 36 percent of ride-hailing trips would otherwise have taken transit—a number Schaller’s report would seem to support—then ride-hailing is responsible for 100 percent of the decline in transit.

The truth is that transit was obsolete before Uber and Lyft were invented. Nearly 96 percent of American workers have cars and most of the 4 percent who do not don’t take transit to work. Outside of New York City, transit plays a minor role in urban transport, and outside of New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, Boston, and San Francisco, its role shrinks to insignificance. Given a choice between automobiles and transit, Americans have overwhelmingly chosen the former. Given a choice between ride-hailing and transit, policymakers should also side with the mode that is faster, more convenient, and least subsidized.

Randal O’Toole is a Cato Institute Senior Fellow working on urban growth, public land, and transportation issues.