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Broward County: Restarting the rideshare revolution

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Better late than never, right?

Over the past few months, Broward County considered slapping ridiculous regulations on ride-sharing companies like Uber and Lyft. The proposed restrictions were so severe that both companies decided to leave the county entirely — taking with them one of the most innovative ways for South Floridians to get from point A to B.

Fortunately, county commissioners are now realizing their mistake. They're now debating a new ordinance that clears the road for ridesharing, rather than building new roadblocks. As a result, Uber, Lyft, and others like them will return.

The county commission is making the right decision. As the war on ridesharing continues to rage across the state, other city and county policymakers should learn from Broward's lesson and welcome the ridesharing revolution.

Uber and Lyft ceased operations in the county over a month ago. Although Uber and Lyft provide extensive insurance policies for drivers and conduct background checks Cato Institute calls "stricter than the screening requirements for many American taxi drivers," Broward nonetheless insisted on its own set of rules.

Those rules were duplicative, invasive and expensive. They included county-run fingerprinting and costly 24-hour commercial insurance coverage for all drivers, regardless of whether they had passengers. Regulators even threatened to arrest rideshare drivers dropping off customers within the county, regardless of where they were picked up.

With this gamut of roadblocks, it's no wonder the ridesharing companies didn't feel welcome.

What happened here isn't unique. Across the state, local officials followed Broward's example and slammed the brakes on ridesharing, wrapping drivers in red tape and undercutting a developing business model.

Why have politicians tried to overregulate ridesharing? As one county executive chillingly put it, "Sometimes, we have to protect people from themselves."

But all they've "protected" us from is a useful service, as well as the jobs and economic growth it creates.

With a few taps on our phones, we can arrange a ride, track the car's progress, and get customer feedback on potential drivers. New ridesharing companies are constantly experimenting with features to attract customers, while existing companies develop perks and improve quality to hold on to them.

Ridesharing is popular and beneficial. Over 90,000 Broward residents signed an online petition supporting ridesharing, and 40,000 Uber users tried to request rides during the first weekend service lapsed in Broward. Uber alone made 1,000,000 trips this year in South Florida, creating more than 10,000 driving jobs. On average, these drivers also make \$6 more per hour and have more flexible hours than taxi drivers.

My generation particularly loves ridesharing. Millennials value the convenience of cashless transactions and transportation on-demand — not to mention lower fares than those of traditional taxis. And we get involved in the business ourselves. At Uber, 19 percent of drivers are under 30 years old.

This latest evolution in transportation has obvious perks, but local officials only seemed to hear feedback from groups afraid of competition and innovation. Local taxi organizations, such as the Florida Taxicab Association, have cast ridesharing as a dangerous unknown. Even now, as the county council rethinks its regulatory framework, an attorney for local Yellow Cabs is labelling their move unconstitutional.

Taxi associations demand that ridesharing be subject to the same regulations as taxis, but it's the regulations themselves that are first worth reconsidering. Instead of penalizing a successful and innovative new idea by wrapping it in red tape, lawmakers should use ridesharing's success to start a new conversation about which regulations work — and which don't.

That's what Broward County is doing right now. It tried restricting these innovative companies with over-regulation — only to scare rideshare companies out of the county entirely. Now, lawmakers are taking positive steps to clear the road for innovation. For the sake of the South Floridians who benefit from ridesharing, they shouldn't let off the gas any time soon.