
Peer-to-peer ride companies like Lyft and UberX can expand limited transportation options for the elderly.

The other day I needed a quick ride home, and as many others of my generation would do, I pulled out my smartphone and requested a ride. I watched my driver's progress and arrival time on my phone, and 15 minutes later I was at my doorstep and paid up without even opening my wallet.

This at-your-fingertips, on-demand mobility experience is quickly becoming an expectation of our transportation system. But while the target beneficiaries of UberX, Lyft, Sidecar, and other transportation network companies have been young urban dwellers, these services could expand transportation options far more in the opposite market: seniors living in suburban and rural communities who are no longer able to drive.

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Transportation for America's recent report, "[Aging in Place: Stuck Without Options](#)," shows that as we grow too old to drive safely, alternative transportation options are a necessity but often hard to find. Based on recent surveys, 88 percent of older adults continue to drive at age 65, but that percentage drops to 69 percent by age 75. This means that by age 75, 31 percent of seniors *must* seek alternative ways to get around.

While many urban areas provide sufficient transportation options for seniors, these choices drop precipitously in suburban and rural environments — with few alternatives, public or private, to cover an individual's mobility needs. Existing senior transportation options in these areas are often limited in scope and inefficient to operate and manage. This is primarily a function of irregularity of senior transportation needs as compared to the rest of the commuting world. The mobility ecosystem for older adults is often a forgotten market; their trips are infrequent and mostly destined for medical appointments, grocery stores, or other widely dispersed locations.

Senior transportation in non-urban environments may be limited to paratransit services (door-to-door transit, often limited to those over 65 and disabled), volunteer driver programs, senior care facility/social services vans, or family members taking time off of work. Even if a community offers these choices, they may fail to provide the responsiveness, flexibility, and independence desired by a retiring Baby Boomer generation. As an example, a common paratransit experience may consist of a telephone reservation at least a day in advance, a 30-minute waiting window to be picked up, and little flexibility as pick-up and drop-off locations are determined ahead of time.

Although many seniors may be retired, this doesn't mean their time is irrelevant or their preferences should be held captive by transportation choices. It also doesn't mean that all seniors are not willing to pay for more efficient transportation choices. Yet many current senior transportation options could be considered a safety net rather than a choice.

Beyond the customer experience, senior transportation programs can be costly to operate given the irregular and infrequent trip patterns. Subsidized shuttle or van services can cost \$80-\$100 per hour to operate (in the range of \$25 per passenger trip). Volunteer driver programs or relying on family may be free, but even these programs have a time-cost involved with recruiting drivers or fitting in rides between busy schedules, which can be very frustrating for seniors who have been independent for most of their lives.

Of course, this assumes that access to smartphones becomes a bit more widespread among seniors. (A [2013 poll](#) showed that 18 percent of adults 65 and older owned a smartphone.) But if so, peer-to-peer ride services offer seniors a combination of on-demand mobility and location flexibility, in addition to giving qualified community members an opportunity to provide a public service for seniors where very few or no transportation options exist. The technology platform that has enabled Lyft, Sidecar, and UberX to proliferate has allowed drivers to go online at any given time using their phones and accept requests for pickups. This system is more efficient and less cumbersome than most similar volunteer driver or senior shuttle programs, which may rely on dispatchers or more complicated ride scheduling systems. Using this platform, peer-to-peer ride services offer an interesting opportunity to fill a niche where existing senior transportation options are limited.

SERIES

The Future of Transportation



For all of the potential similarities between today's peer-to-peer services and a potential future senior mobility equivalent, there is one primary difference. Today, many Lyft, Sidecar, and UberX drivers enjoy meeting new people and the conversations that follow. Yet most are motivated by the schedule flexibility and supplemental income. Driving for a senior-focused market may not offer the same earnings potential due to the type and frequency of senior trips.

Thus, incentives to keep an adequate quantity of drivers on-demand in this type of system would need to be analyzed, and may include a subsidy from the sponsoring agencies — perhaps cities, transit agencies, or social services. (A strong desire from drivers to contribute to a much-needed community service wouldn't hurt, either.) This assumes that sponsoring agencies would be willing to support costs associated with any necessary safety, sensitivity training for drivers, and insurance. But even if subsidized, these types of services may still cost less than existing options or potential alternatives, while providing a community-based platform to provide enhanced senior mobility.

When we talk about the "future of commuting," my generation visualizes [quad-copters](#) and [Hyperloop](#). However, the not-so-distant future also includes a vastly growing and tech-savvy senior population that wants to remain mobile and have choices. Given immense and immediate senior mobility needs, we can learn from companies like the new wave of peer-to-peer ride services and their demonstration of innovation in urban transportation. Their success has partially been the result of leveraging technology, generational shifts, and actively seeking to

transform and improve upon a traditional transportation model. Senior mobility outside of our cities is ready for a similar transformation, and peer-to-peer ride services should be considered part of that solution.

About the Author

Paul Supawanich

Paul Supawanich is a transportation consultant working with cities to improve transit, biking, and walking options around the United States. He is a Senior Associate with Nelson\Nygaard raised in the Midwest but living in San Francisco.