

Ridesharing—Where Does It Go from Here?

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It is somewhat ironic that this first national strategies workshop on ridesharing research needs is taking place here in light of two other events that occurred in this same building within about an eight-year period. Just about eight years ago, the Transportation Research Board's Committee on Paratransit held the first ridesharing workshop. It was the first time that people actively involved in ridesharing had an opportunity to realize that there were quite a few other persons also interested in this sort of activity. Although a very diverse group attended this first meeting, the only predominant thread among them was that, with very few exceptions, no one had a formal background in transportation. They were people involved in ridesharing for a variety of reasons, many of them only secondarily concerned with transportation.

The second event took place here just last week--an international conference on ground transportation sponsored by the U.S. Department of Transportation, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the Transportation Research Board. At this time, the deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) addressed the gathering on the Reagan administration's transportation philosophy. What struck me about that talk was the fact that the OMB representative made a major point of emphasizing paratransit and ridesharing. I observed at the time how far this subject has come in a relatively brief period.

This is by way of introduction to my assignment during this conference on research needs and the roles of the private and public sectors and to the challenge of distilling all the workshop discussions and crystallizing them for you.

Picking up the major thrust of a conference midway through its proceedings is a big challenge. Nonetheless, because one of the purposes of this conference is to identify research priorities, I sought to do this by raising a series of questions, things that are currently unknown. It strikes me that from the questions raised will come a series of issues to be researched.

There were five questions that most of the discussion tended to focus on in a general sense: What do we know? What does it mean? How do we sustain, defend, and promote ridesharing? Where do we go from here? and How do we get there? Now, in terms of the sorts of things that were talked about, let me divide these into two areas. I think there was a set of issues that had to do with continuation, evolution, and expansion of ridesharing in an incremental, evolutionary sort of way. How do we continue doing more of the same, but do it better?

Then, let me talk about what might be called a series of broader issues and broader questions. The issues that I am addressing (here) tended to be is-

sues that were raised by many of the groups.

MOTIVATION TO RIDESHARING

First of all, a series of questions exists on what motivates commuters and companies to rideshare. What are the economic, social, and psychological factors that are most important? How can we use these to affect marketing programs and marketing from the viewpoint of the individual, from the viewpoint of the employer, and from the viewpoint of the decision maker? There is a set of behavioral issues we do not understand as well as we could on what the motivating factors are that tend to cause ridesharing programs to be successful. There was talk about various types of profiles of individuals and organizations that have successful ridesharing programs.

IMPACTS AND EVALUATION

Second, there was a lot of discussion on impacts and evaluation. What are the impacts of ridesharing on the employee, the employer, and the public sector, as well as on the community and the public sector at different levels? There is a feeling that there is a real need to monitor costs and benefits and that the monitoring process should be on a continuing basis and, I suspect, that monitoring is probably a better term than evaluation.

The observation has been made that even some very basic information is not known at this point--basic information in terms of fundamental accounting, ridesharing programs, development of adequate performance measures, and the development of impacts and impacts in a much broader sense than we have tended to look at them in the past. For example, a number of people made the point that ridesharing programs do have an effect with regard to questions of tardiness, questions of absenteeism, which do have definite economic implications for the organization.

A continuing thread that seems to run through all the discussions is that the private sector should be more involved. Question: Is the private sector ready to be more involved? Everybody feels it should. Can it be done on an economic basis? If it cannot with existing economics, how, if at all, can one change the economics? Just what are the economic realities at this point in time; in the past, have we tended to look at the economics in too narrow a sense?

Wrong measures can have very perverse impacts and we have to be very careful about what information we collect and how we use it. Example: The most obvious measure of effectiveness is to take the cost of a program and divide by the number of pools that have been formed; this gives you the cost-effec-

tiveness of your program. Two points were made about this measure of effectiveness. First of all, it tends to encourage public organizations to keep their own pools as opposed to encouraging private-sector organizations to develop pools that might not be counted under the public sector's quota. Second, it might very well cause one not to implement pools in areas where the payoff might be minimal in terms of numbers, but quite significant in terms of a whole set of goals and objectives. So, one has to be very, very careful in terms of the information that is being used.

Researchers must perform evaluations and provide information that is relevant to decision makers and practitioners. Too often the evaluations have been of interest to the researchers but of only secondary interest to the decision maker.

Everybody agreed on the need for improved information dissemination to get out results and the point was made that this is particularly necessary in a field where so many things are happening so quickly. I think everybody observed that this kind of thing is always said: but we really mean it, that it is really crucial in this particular area.

THE RIDESHARING ORGANIZATION

What are the objectives, the roles, and the missions for ridesharing organizations? One can argue that we are living in a changing world and that objectives are changing very quickly. For example, one might infer that the Reagan administration has said that transportation is no longer going to be used to satisfy social objectives. That certainly had been a public policy in the past at the federal level. It might even be questioned to what extent the federal government is looking on transportation as a means of satisfying mobility needs at the federal level.

Now, if that is so and if a lot of other things are changing, how, if at all, does it change what the objectives of ridesharing programs should be? The point being made here is that objectives are different for different organizations. They are different for the employer than they might be for the community as a whole.

Given where we are now and given a lot of variation, should we standardize, formalize, and institutionalize successful models of ridesharing or is the concept too young, the situation too uncertain, and local areas too different so that flexibility and experimentation must continue? What new services and service-delivery frameworks are appropriate for promoting ridesharing? Ones that we might not have tried in the past, particularly those oriented toward carpooling, are where the largest potential would appear to be. Can ridesharing be applied in noncommuting applications? If so, where and how?

LONG-RANGE QUESTIONS

Let me now turn to a set of more fundamental or long-range questions that seemed to emerge from the discussions. The first is, How does ridesharing fit into the overall transportation and societal framework? Is it really significant or are we tinkering at the margin? Have we skimmed the cream? Have we gotten the most success that we might or are we at the beginning of the emergence of basically a new mindset on the delivery of urban transportation services?

To answer these questions, one should be able to get a handle on what is the natural demand for ridesharing, given no private or public programs. Then, what is the long-term incremental demand of or-

ganized ridesharing on top of ridesharing that would occur naturally? What is required to realize that organized demand? Is the investment justified when compared with other transportation investments in an era of scarce resources or should the investment be made at all anywhere in the transportation sector?

I must say that I was struck that no one had raised this question. I gather that Alan Altshuler in his speech on Monday night raised some questions as to really how important ridesharing is and, therefore, how much resources should we spend on it.

What is the impact of changing demographics on ridesharing and what impact does ridesharing have on demographics, land use, and urban development? Example: Does ridesharing cause urban sprawl, respond to urban sprawl, or does it really matter very much at all? Can ridesharing be used as a tool in economic development and urban revitalization and, if so, how? Who are the people who bring that about?

What are the implications of uncertainty and shocks on ridesharing? This was a specific question in terms of energy shortfall situations, of which there have been two. What will the needs be and what are the potential ridesharing responses to future energy emergencies? Are we prepared and what should be done to prepare, if we are not?

How do we deal with uncertainty in a whole lot of different dimensions, of technological uncertainty? What types of cars will we have? Will commuter cars actually emerge? What will the energy efficiency of cars be? Will that affect ridesharing in a positive or a negative sense? There is uncertainty with respect to public expenditures for transportation; uncertainty with respect to disposable income with a whole lot of demographics in terms of how much people will have to travel; and uncertainty with respect to what the implications of communications might be and a whole lot of changes going on of a societal nature. Will they increase or decrease the need for travel? How do we plan and manage under uncertainty, recognizing that it, in fact, exists?

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

There is a whole host of questions relating to organizations' roles and responsibilities that occurred in three dimensions--first, the question of redefined public roles in terms of responsibility between federal, state, and local governments; second, the balance between public and private roles with emphasis on the private sector; and, third, employee-employer relationships and roles.

If we look at the public sector, one could envision at least two scenarios at the local level. One scenario is that in which the public ridesharing organization broadens itself to encompass a whole series of transportation system management (TSM) strategies and ridesharing serves as the base to expand upon; and/or, given the crisis and cutbacks in public transportation, the ridesharing agency assumes more of a role relating to public transportation. This is a scenario that brings together, if you will, TSM, ridesharing, and conventional public transportation.

A second scenario several people raised was one in which the ridesharing organization has a more diminished public role and, in fact, in which the public role was at best a catalytic or supportive role with more and more responsibilities shifted from the public over to the private sector.

A whole series of questions was raised with respect to the role of the private sector. Basically, who are the private-sector organizations? Are there new actors and, if so, what sorts of policy instruments and devices do these people use? One example of change in roles and responsibilities was that of

the developer playing an increasingly key role and that there is a series of tools that can be very effectively used, such as zoning, land use, and parking policies to support ridesharing. In fact, ridesharing could be used to further the development process in a way that might not have been possible if one used conventional measures. Questions were raised relating to how an employer develops an overall transportation strategy using parking, flexible work hours, employee benefits, and that we are looking at more than simply carpooling and vanpooling programs.

There was a whole series of discussions on third-party organizations and should they be private, not for profit, or should they be private for profit and should they be supported out of public funds? Should they be cooperative, supported by private employers? Just a whole lot of different possibilities and scenarios.

These questions led to a more fundamental question and the term "social contract" was thrown around with the question here being, Is there a new social contract emerging with respect to roles and responsibilities of organizations? The inference was that we have gone about things in a fairly traditional way with our highway programs and our transit programs. Now, there are going to be different actors, or organizations concerned with funding, planning, management, and service delivery, and, to a large extent, ridesharing is at the tip of the iceberg. It is a leading indicator of some of the opportunities, some of the changes, that will occur, and we ought to look beyond the concept to the much more profound and significant implications with respect to organizational roles and activities.

PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

There was a great deal of discussion on the needs and skills and the mechanisms to train individuals with the inference being that the traditional set of transportation-planning disciplines, although having some impact, might very well have secondary impact in terms of more entrepreneurial-oriented people and the types of capabilities those people should have.

These have been basically some of the questions and concerns that emerged from the cross-sectional discussion. I am sure that I missed many. I go back in conclusion to the speech by the OMB representative and think of how far we have come. We are now talking about services that are understood by decision makers. There are constituencies out there now for ridesharing. There are many successful services and models that one can point to. So, now, to a large extent, the people who in the past were on the outside are now the people who more and more are on the inside in terms of influencing change. We should be cautious not to repeat the mistakes that people on the inside so often make--their tendencies to become very complacent, defensive, narrow, parochial, once they have gotten the things they want. We in ridesharing, obviously, have many opportunities; there is a need to be creative as well as realistic.

[Editor's Note: Roos' remarks were made during the cross-sectional workshop and were based on reports from the chairmen of the seven topical workshops.]