

Renegotiating the Social Contract: Closing Remarks

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I would like to begin by answering a question that several of you have asked me, How is the conference going? My answer is, It has gone extremely well. Each of you is to be congratulated for an extraordinary effort.

Throughout the conference, I have had the opportunity of wandering in and out of sessions, listening to summaries from participants and chairpersons alike. From that perspective I would like to point out some common issues and trends that I have observed. Alan Altshuler began this conference with a very thought-provoking address challenging the potential of ridesharing. In making that challenge, he assumed a very specific definition of ridesharing as car, van, and buspooling.

I would like to suggest that a primary undercurrent of this conference was a realization that, while ridesharing denotes various pooling modes, it has a connotation that goes far beyond a specific modal orientation to attitudes about mobility and methods of delivering it. The potential of ridesharing can be neatly summed up in modal-split figures.

Throughout the conference, I was struck with the various expressions about the state of flux in transportation. Many of you were asking, What are the goals? Congestion reduction? Energy conservation? Cost savings? Mobility? Many expressed concern and optimism over local transportation financial crises, drying up of federal funds, and opening up of new opportunities in the private sector. And I was amazed that there seemed to be as many institutions for, and ways of delivering, ridesharing services as there were participants: transit authorities, private developers, private employers, nonprofit brokers, for-profit leasing companies, metropolitan planning organizations, city governments, and so on, with no one of them clearly superior or dominant. Over and over again we found ourselves grappling with questions much larger than just how to put two people in a car--questions that are at the heart, rather than at the fringe, of urban passenger transportation policy.

It occurred to me, as I listened to these questions, that, because of the extreme flexibility of the ridesharing mode and the fluidity of the institutional delivery system, the people working in ridesharing are at the cutting edge of a reorganization of the delivery of transportation services or changing the relationships that have existed among the provider, financier, user, and regulator of transportation services. The implications of these changes go far beyond the modes that the term ridesharing denotes.

I saw evidence of this reorganization of delivery systems and of these changing relationships in three trends I traced through several of the workshops.

The first is a series of questions that center around an identification of the role of ridesharing. What is our mission? What is our product? Are we an arm of a transit authority? Are we fleet-maintenance organizations, matching organizations, or trainers of private-sector coordinators? Are we marketing transit, parking management, and/or vanpools? Or are we marketing a transportation consulting service? And which institution is doing which of these in a given area? The fact that there were nearly as many legitimate answers to these questions as there were people is testimony to the changes that are taking place in our traditional systems. The most important role of ridesharing may ultimately be one of reordering our delivery system to more closely meet our mobility needs and our financial and technical constraints.

A second trend (or set of questions) that I observed stems from this state of change and the flexibility of ridesharing modes in dealing with individual travel needs. Many of us were asking some very fundamental questions about mobility. What needs does mobility satisfy? Are all of those needs travel related? What fears and irritations are associated with travel? How can we design our mobility delivery systems to satisfy those needs and deal with the fears and irritations while at the same time meeting some of society's broader goals? Many of us were uncomfortable with a ridesharing research conference bearing the burden of questions that the entire transportation profession should be asking. But I realized that, before such questions can be asked seriously, there must be a readiness to make fundamental changes in our delivery system. Nowhere is such a readiness more evident than in the myriad of experiments being conducted under the umbrella of ridesharing. So perhaps these far-reaching questions are most appropriately asked here.

Finally, I noticed a set of skills questions in several of the workshops. How do we deal with pool formation and dissolution? How do we train our staff in selling? How do we allocate our budget between staff and promotion? Underlying these questions I was again struck with the observation: We are taking some very rigid delivery systems (and people) and trying to retrain them to make them as flexible and as fluid as mobility needs really are. We are trying to reshape the attitudes and skills of the people delivering transportation services and, in the process, we are reorganizing their institutions.

In response to these questions you did not call for the data and theories customarily produced by research. In fact, many of you said ridesharing was overloaded with data. Rather, you called for three interesting categories of information that may or may not be defined as research. First, amid this

state of flux in our institutions, financing, and delivery systems you called for scenarios of what new institutions and delivery systems might look like, examples of new relationships that have been successfully forged, and case studies of how new relationships develop and old ones dissolve. These scenarios and case studies will serve as much needed beacons in a decade that will see a great deal of turbulence in our transportation systems and policy.

Second, you called for information and methods to help build skills that traditionally have never been found among transportation professionals but are now critical to effective performance in new delivery systems. Finally, you asked for feedback--not evaluations designed to justify your existence and funding, but meaningful information designed to help

you, the ridesharing manager, improve your effectiveness.

I walk away from this conference not only with a better understanding of what ridesharing research needs are but also with an important new realization. The people using the umbrella of ridesharing are, in fact, in the process of renegotiating the long-standing social contracts among the public sector, the employer, the employee, and the transportation provider. I have been equally impressed with the rather straightforward research agenda that you have mapped out today to help carry out that renegotiation process. This renegotiation should prove vital in determining the future directions of ridesharing.