

Ride-sharing surges in Chicago, raising congestion worries

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The ride-sharing business is surging in Chicago, with the number of registered vehicles used for companies like Uber and Lyft quadrupling over a three-year stretch, according to figures provided by the city via a public records request from the Tribune.

The growth in ride sharing has raised concerns among both transportation experts and professional drivers that the services offered by companies like Uber and Lyft, while convenient, may be increasing congestion on Chicago streets while cutting into public transit use.

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“Uber and Lyft have not delivered what they said they would — fewer cars, less traffic and more mobility,” said Ron Burke, executive director of the Active Transportation Alliance, which advocates for pedestrians, bicyclists and transit use. “They’re convenient and people like them, but it appears that they’re creating more cars and more traffic in the downtown area if not elsewhere. That’s not a sustainable trajectory.”

The number of vehicles that provide four or more trips a month, defined by the city as “active registered vehicles,” increased from 15,078 in March 2015 to 68,832 in December 2017, according to data supplied by the city’s Department of Business Affairs and Consumer Protection, which licenses ride-share operators, after requests made by the Chicago Tribune under the Freedom of Information Act.

The city released its data only after months of negotiations with the Tribune, and it declined to provide other information requested, including the number of trips made by ride-sharing services like Uber, Lyft and Via and where trips began and ended. City officials denied most of the records requests, saying the data would reveal proprietary information about the ride-share companies.

The overall number of vehicles registered with the city for ride-sharing services increased since March 2015 from 26,803 to 117,557 in December 2017. The numbers include owners who use a car for more than one company, those who provide four or more trips a month and those who do less business.

Congestion concerns

It is difficult to say whether or how much ride sharing has increased congestion in Chicago or, more specifically, downtown because the city’s transportation department does not have estimates of the total number of vehicles on the roads over time.

Indeed, ride sharing may be keeping some drivers off the streets, because they are using Uber or Lyft instead. During recent budget hearings, city officials noted decreased garage revenues, which would indicate fewer people taking cars downtown. Ride-sharing companies argue that their services make people less dependent on car ownership.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning found that for the fourth quarter of 2016, the most recent time period for which data are available, the total time that Chicago area expressways and tollways are congested daily increased by 15 minutes to just under 5½ hours, compared with the fourth quarter of 2015. CMAP said the increase could be due to lower gas prices, a stronger economy and road construction.

Anecdotal accounts from both ride-sharing drivers and cabdrivers say an increase in ride-sharing vehicles on the streets is causing slower travel times, along with construction and more bike lanes.

“There are more ride share vehicles on the road these days and it’s pretty obvious they’re having a huge impact on congestion, especially when you consider all the double-parking, circling around the block and U-turns that drivers do when picking up and dropping off passengers,” said Harry Campbell, a California Uber and Lyft driver who runs a popular blog for drivers called “The Rideshare Guy,” in an email.

Campbell said this is hurting ride-share drivers because they already don’t make much money to sit in traffic. He said Chicago Uber drivers earn just \$9 per hour.

Cabdrivers also complain about the increased number of ride-sharing cars on the road. The cab industry has been badly hurt by ride sharing, which has sunk the price of taxi medallions.

David Kreisman, spokesman for Cab Drivers United AFSCME Local 2500, said the number of cabs operating in the city is limited to 6,999 to reduce congestion and assure there is adequate coverage, but there are no such limits on ride sharing. There are currently 11,961 active, licensed taxicab chauffeurs and 6,908 taxi medallion licenses, the city said. “Every other car in the Loop seems to be a ride-share vehicle,” Kreisman said.

Cabdriver Manuel Rosales, 43, said he used to drive 12 hours and about 200 miles daily. Now he drives the same amount of time, but just 120 to 140 miles a day, and he blames congestion from ride-sharing vehicles, bike lanes and construction.

“It is definitely impacting us,” said Rosales, noting that the worst areas are anything along Lake Shore Drive or close to the I-90/94 expressways downtown. “Every day, Lake Shore Drive north to south is just a nightmare, completely.”

Bryant Greening, co-founder of LegalRideshare, a law firm that represents injured drivers and passengers from ride-sharing services, said drivers tell him that congestion is worse and fares have become harder to come by, which suggests greater competition.

Greening does not expect full-time drivers to drop out of the business, but he said he thinks some part-timers will drive less if they make less money than they used to. “If it’s not easy money, it’s not worth your time,” he said.

Ald. Anthony Beale, 9th, who has advocated for stronger licensing requirements for ride-sharing drivers, said he believed ride sharing is having an “adverse impact” on the city in terms of both congestion and loss of garage revenue. He said regulating the industry has been his “biggest challenge” over the last few years.

“They feel they’re above the law and don’t have to be regulated,” Beale said.

Lilia Chacon, a spokeswoman for the city’s business affairs department, wrote in an email: “The City’s goal is to satisfy consumer demand and provide diverse, safe and reliable transportation options. We continue to enforce rules and regulations that create a fair and vigorous marketplace while protecting consumer interests. These ride-share vehicles are primarily personal vehicles being driven by part-time drivers. We know one thing: we are seeing growth in the number of drivers because of growing demand.

“Ride-sharing companies, meanwhile, say that they complement transit use and are providing options to car ownership.”

Lyft spokesman Scott Corielle noted that Lyft Line, Lyft’s shared-ride option that puts more than one passenger in one car, accounts for about 40 percent of rides in markets where it is available, including Chicago. He also cited a report that about a quarter-million Lyft passengers say they got rid of a car thanks to the availability of ride sharing.

Uber spokeswoman Molly Spaeth said Uber’s goal is to “decrease reliance on personal car ownership by encouraging more multi-modal journeys using a mix of public transportation and ridesharing.” Spaeth also pointed to an increase in downtown residents, declining gas prices, new bike lanes, dedicated bus lanes as all contributing to traffic changes in downtown Chicago.

Studies about congestion and ride sharing have been done in both New York City and in San Francisco. A 2017 New York study found that Uber, Lyft and other app-based ride services added 600 million miles in 2016, more than the total yellow cab mileage in Manhattan. The San Francisco study found that ride-sharing vehicles account for about 20 percent of all daily vehicle miles traveled.

Burke said more ride-sharing data should be made available so cities can make better decisions on how to manage the technology. The New York City report was based on trip and mileage data that are uniquely available there, providing the most complete assessment of the new services in any U.S. city.

Public transit loses

Ride-sharing services also have been blamed for falling public transit use. A 2017 study by the University of California-Davis Institute of Transportation Studies found that after survey

respondents adopted ride-sharing services, there was a 6 percent net decline in transit use.

Total ridership on the CTA declined almost 9 percent since its peak of 546 million rides in 2012, down to 498 million in 2016. Other big-city transit agencies are also seeing declines, particularly in bus ridership.

“There are a number of factors that are contributing to the ridership loss,” said CTA President Dorval Carter. “Certainly the ride-sharing market is one of them.” He also cited low gas prices.

The City Council last year approved a proposal to increase city fees on ride-share trips and give the money to the CTA. The Emanuel administration had argued that the ride-sharing industry has drained \$40 million from city and other local government coffers, in part by shifting some commuters away from the CTA.

However, a study last week by the Chicago-based Shared-Use Mobility Center, a nonprofit public interest organization, found that peak use of services like Uber comes on weekends and evenings, not during rush hours when public transit use is highest and when there is the most traffic congestion. The study, which looked at Chicago and four other cities, also found a correlation between frequent ride sharing use and lower rates of car ownership.

“In a congested environment, generally nothing is more efficient at moving lots of people than public transit,” said the center’s executive director, Sharon Feigon. “But we can see where (ride sharing) fits into the gaps where the transit systems don’t work as well.”

The number of ride-sharing vehicles on Chicago streets may be chipped away by market forces.

Greening also said he does not have an opinion whether the city should cap the number of ride-sharing vehicles on the road, as it caps the number of taxis. “I think we should let the free market decide how many vehicles are on the road,” he said.

“If supply is outstripping demand, supply will be cut back,” agreed Northwestern University economics professor Ian Savage, who specializes in transportation issues.

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