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Uber Gets a Lyft from Think Tank

It's no mystery why the Rudin Center suggested rideshare companies get a piece of the taxpayer-funded paratransit business

By James Weisman and Allen Weingarten

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When you're looking to promote your own special interest with policymakers, the media and the general public, it is always a good idea to find subtle ways to subsume that private goal within the selfless idea of serving the public good. Lobbyists have been doing this forever. Now we have a case study of the practice, courtesy of the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy.

Last month the center put out a study that dramatized the extent to which the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's paratransit system, Access-a-Ride, is dysfunctional, frustrating its disabled and elderly passengers, while at the same time being a needlessly costly burden to New York's taxpayers. A central part of the report's recommendations was the idea that Uber and Lyft, two very deep-pocketed tech giants, could play a key role in addressing the system's dysfunction.

This idea took off like it had wings. Crain's reported that the think tank "recommended that the MTA collaborate with companies like Uber and Lyft to offer subsidized trips," which **the Citizens Budget Commission estimated in a jointly released report could save almost \$30 million a year.**

Missing from this uncritical hoopla, however, was a very important observation: the Rudin Center included Uber, Lyft, and another e-hail company, Via, as advisers to the formulation of its report and failed to signal to the media that these companies had played a role in promoting a policy that served their own interests.

Even more egregious, perhaps, is that the advisory board that Rudin brought together did not have a single disability advocate or taxi medallion owner who might have been able to push back and offer countervailing arguments to the idea that Uber and its imitators should play any role in the reform of a paratransit system designed to improve mobility for New Yorkers with disabilities. Uber and Lyft vehicles are almost invariably not wheelchair-accessible, yet the companies want to be rewarded with inclusion in a system designed originally for the very New Yorkers they are disrespecting and ignoring.

A mantra of disability rights activists is, "Nothing about us without us." The Rudin report apparently did not discuss paratransit options with the affected community, i.e., people with disabilities. Disability advocates, who fought hard for taxi access, are being undermined by the success of inaccessible transportation network companies, such as Uber, which have already



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shrunk the yellow-cab system and dealt it a severe financial blow. Taxis are the city's only for-hire vehicles reasonably accessible to wheelchair users.

We know why these companies want to have a paratransit profit center, but why would Rudin promote them and bury their connection to its report? This lack of transparency diminishes the credibility of not only this report, but of the Rudin Center itself.

As advocate Dustin Jones put it: "Regardless of how fashionable it may be to push tech partnerships, the reality is that Uber drivers have more than 30,000 cars in New York City but virtually none is wheelchair-accessible. How can anyone suggest that this discriminatory company deserves a lucrative state contract to transport people with disabilities?"

Access-a-Ride is, without a doubt, in need of improvement and we need to come together to make the system more efficient and less costly. We believe that the simplest and most cost-effective solution is to develop a plan to allow taxis to replace Access-A-Ride; or, more modestly, to be integrated connectively within the system to promote greater efficiency.

With the ranks of accessible taxi cabs increasing daily and with a court mandate that 50% of yellow taxis and 20% of green taxis must become accessible by 2020, it makes sense to use taxis to provide more efficient transit services. This is not a radical concept. The 2015 traffic study conducted under the auspices of the mayor on the impact of Uber and its competitors, found: "The city can expand the reach of accessible for-hire service by identifying ways to improve coordination between the TLC's growing accessible taxi program and the MTA's current Access-A-Ride system. The city's accessible yellow and green taxis can help to provide greatly enhanced and more efficient service for Access-A-Ride users. The city and the MTA should continue to work together towards that end."

Taxi medallion owners and wheelchair users have been taking an unfair and unnecessary beating from poorly regulated e-hail competitors that are being allowed to operate in the city unencumbered by the same rules and regulations that all taxis must follow. Integrating this iconic city industry into the paratransit system would be a boon to hardworking entrepreneurs and a boost for New Yorkers with disabilities. That would be a rewarding outcome that does not reward bad behavior.