



In pilot scheme, San Francisco gives away public parking to carsharing companies

By Dan Raile

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A few mornings ago I chanced on a 9"x11" slice bearing the emblem of the Municipal Transportation Agency, on a phone pole outside my apartment.

It concerned an MTA pilot project currently underway which will commercialize a public resource and grant special permission for its use for a select group of local disruptive companies, providing them competitive advantages

And it had nothing to do with Google buses. Sounds like a story, I thought, greedily, submitting to the subsequent chain of Pavlovian reactions.

Yet, it wasn't quite the story I thought it was.

The notice announced a public hearing for two parking spots on my block that were proposed to be taken over by Zipcar, the preeminent carsharing company owned by Avis. Those spots are among 900 currently intended to be converted to car-sharing use over the next two years, divided equally among Zipcar, City Car Share and Getaround.

Another MTA Pilot, the Commuter Shuttles Policy and Pilot Project, emerged this spring to infamy and outrage. That program, which charges commuter shuttles \$1 per use of city bus stops, has been operational since June 1st, so far without incident. The wave of bus blockades and protests that preceded it have also subsided.

The newest surge of tech-revulsion in San Francisco has centered on apps like MonkeyParking and ParkModo, which propose to pay some users to occupy parking spots until other users need them. The outrage these apps have induced has made it all the way to City Attorney's office, and hinges on the unseemliness (and illegality) of private companies profiting off of public parking, an already scarce resource.

One would expect that news of the city giving away parking spots to a select group of companies would provide a healthy dose of grist to this rage-mill. Perhaps oddly, that hasn't really been the case.

"We are certainly hearing skepticism and opposition to the city making partnerships with private businesses for access to public goods," says Andy Thornley, who is leading the project for the MTA. "The bus issue has made people very sensitive."

Still, Thornley says that most of the feedback the MTA is getting has to do with which spots are converted, rather than the underlying premises of the project. Representatives from the three car-sharing organizations concur that they haven't heard much in the way of backlash.

That could be because, as Ron Conway told the New Yorker in a piece this week, "The shuttle buses are nothing but a symbol of the issue...The buses serve a real useful purpose, and help the environment by not putting people in cars."

The car share pilot has all the purpose without the symbolism.

Corporate shuttle buses are huge, loud and exclusive. Zipcar, et al, are less visible, less invasive, less infuriating. But both projects derive from the same basic assumption on the part of the MTA: there are too many cars on San Francisco streets, and unless the City enacts ameliorative policy, it will only get worse.

Claims of environmental and congestion benefits did little to dissuade opponents of the Shuttle program. They contested the supporting statistics offered by the MTA, and anyway considered those concerns secondary to the issue of corporate giveaways and the preferential treatment of technology companies.

It's fairly common sense that providing mass transportation to employees is a net environmental good. The car sharing pilot faces the challenge of convincing the public of some less intuitive benefits.

These were first demonstrated in research by Susan Shaheen of UC Berkeley's Transportation Sustainability Research Center.

Shaheen found that every available shared car results in the shedding of seven to 13 cars from city streets, though the mechanism and timeframe for this shedding are somewhat mysterious. It follows that by making more parking available for shared cars, the overall parking system will improve for everyone.

"We appreciate that it's a pretty big leap of faith," says Thornley, "and its important to remember that this is an experiment and not a forever thing, necessarily."

It's an experiment that has been gradually gaining momentum since Mayor Ed Lee was City Administrator in Gavin Newsom's mayoral administration.

Mayor Lee and current Board of Supervisors president David Chiu were instrumental in raising the on-street parking issue, according to Rick Hutchinson, CEO of City CarShare. "Mayor Lee has been a longtime fan of what we are doing," he says.

City Carshare is the elder statesman in the car-sharing market. And I don't use the word 'statesman' lightly: the organization is a non-profit that, in addition to providing a service nearly identical to that of Zipcar, receives grants and donations to influence policy and legislation around "shared mobility", and develops programs to the ensure the social equity and environmental sustainability of car sharing.

In 2011, City Carshare funded and implemented a similar but smaller pilot in partnership with the MTA. The current program derives from the lessons learned and data gathered during that first experiment. City Carshare and the MTA both point to the success of Zipcar and emergence of other competitors as proof of principle. By opening the playing field to other car sharing outfits and collecting the same data from each, the MTA hopes to better understand the effectiveness of different models.

Of the three chosen, Getaround may raise the most question marks. As a peer-to-peer car sharing network, Getaround users rent cars by the hour, as they do with Zipcar and City Carshare. But Getaround's fleet of vehicles are private cars owned by other users. While car owners will have to pay to use the spots provided by the MTA (as do Zipcar and City Carshare), they also get paid to do so. Getaround estimates that owners make an average of \$500 per month, with top earners clearing a grand.

City CarShare's Hutchinson has some mixed feelings about Getaround's participation. While he helped write legislation that enabled peer-to-peer car sharing to become a legal business model, he believes their involvement is problematic.

In developing the pilot, the MTA made a list of criteria for participation. In addition to satisfying some basic vehicle requirements, the cars have to be clearly marked and available for hourly rentals at least 75 percent of the time.

It's with the 75 percent number that Hutchinson takes uncton.

“In support of the public interest, vehicles should be available to the public 24/7... In effect, the MTA is allowing the public right of way to be reserved for the vehicle 100% of the time, but is only requiring it serve the public 75% of time.”

Hutchinson says that City Carshare is continuing to press the MTA to change that criterion, and that there are a number of ways Getaround could reasonably adapt to meet 100 percent availability.

In addition to its peer-to-peer model, Getaround differs from the other two organizations in that it is a far less established company. Founded in 2009, its last fundraising round was a \$13.9 million Series A from the likes of Marissa Mayer and Menlo Ventures, raised back in summer 2012.

Getaround says they have since invested in technology and capacity and look to open in new markets in 2015. They declined to comment as to how much runway they have left or in regards to any current plans to raise funding.

The inclusion in the pilot represents a significant opportunity for Getaround to raise awareness and expand its user base. This is an intentional part of the pilot, with which the MTA hopes to encourage car sharing as a public good. But to some, that might look an awful lot like the city picking favorites.

The MTA will be hosting public hearings for spaces requested by the three organizations throughout the summer, after which the proposed spaces will be sent to the MTA's (mayor-appointed) Board of Directors. By which I mean to say, speak now or forever hold your peace. A map of the spots requested can be found here.

The absence of backlash until now suggests either that the combatants in the so-called “culture war” in San Francisco are maturing or that the program is successfully flying under the radar. Either way, the atmosphere seems hospitable for public engagement.

Any cogent argument about the MTA's current public-private programs has to rise above the level of “It's capitalism and if you don't like it, you can leave” or “Corporations are evil”, to address the complexities of the City's efforts to reduce the number of cars in its streets and the validity of its mandate to do so.

For any still-unconvinced, self-proclaimed anarchists, I suggest consulting the American anarchist canon before taking up thy bullhorn. In particular, have a look at Paul Goodman's 1961 essay “Banning Cars in Manhattan,” in which he proposed substituting private cars with increased mass transit and electric taxicabs. Ask yourself, anarchist, whether shared car services deserve parking spaces in your utopia.

<http://pando.com/2014/07/09/in-pilot-scheme-san-francisco-gives-away-public-parking-to-carsharing-companies/>