CASE STUDY

City of Monrovia: Leveraging emerging ridesharing services to expand mobility options

Agency:	City of Monrovia, CA
Location:	Monrovia, CA
Service Area:	City of Monrovia, CA
Modes:	Buses (operated by Foothill Transit, LA Metro), Gold Line light rail (operated by LA Metro), ADA paratransit services (operated by Access Services, LA Metro), on-demand services (partnership with Lyft), bikeshare services (partnership with LimeBike)
Community Context:	Transit services managed by the City of Monrovia
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Overview

The city of Monrovia, CA, offers a range of transportation options operated at the regional and local levels. On a regional scale, Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro) operates the Gold Line light rail station, bus lines, and paratransit services; and \. there is also a regional San Gabriel Valley bus service run by Foothill Transit. On the local level, the City of Monrovia launched in March 2018 the GoMonrovia program, a partnership with Lyft and LimeBike that provides subsidized on-demand ride hailing and bike sharing services.

The City started to revamp its approach to transit in early 2017, thinking about how to provide more and better mobility options for people across the Monrovia area. The city and the entire Southern California region have been experienced great development interest, bringing housing affordability problems and a huge local housing development and population growth that have imposed new mobility challenges for the region. Around 2,000 units of new housing have been built in the last few years, and the Southern California Association of Governments, the metropolitan planning office, has projected that in the next 25 years the population will grow by about 11 million people.

As in many suburban communities, the main local public transportation mode in Monrovia was the dial-a-ride shuttle bus program, which had low usage and high costs for the City. To face the new mobility challenges and enable the development of the region, the City created the GoMonrovia program, leveraging existing mobility services to better serve the community. Both Lyft rides and LimeBike's dockless bikes have had high levels of ridership, posing the question of how to scale up the program to satisfy the increasing demand.

Leading Change

The City Manager's Office has driven the change in the local transit approach in Monrovia. The leadership team of the City of Monrovia, including the City Manager, the Deputy City Manager and the Assistant to the City Manager, took the mobility challenges as one of its priorities, setting the agenda for the entire organization.

The leadership, engagement and practical approach of the team allow them to move things fast, taking less than eight months from the idea to the implementation of the GoMonrovia program. As decision makers, they not only prioritized mobility, but also got actively involved in moving towards concrete initiatives that could be roll out quickly and then in developing a framework and route map for the implementation phase.

The organizational culture of the City, characterized by a fluid communication and shared purpose, also supported the process to be fast. The City's executive managers are used to meet several times a year to identify what do they have to get done in the short term. For the GoMonrovia program, the City Manager's Office used those instances and others to generate buy-in within the organization and move the program forward. They focused their message on the big picture, linking mobility with the development interests of the region. There was a consensus amongst City's executives that development related issues are important. The GoMonrovia program was a practical way to respond to those challenges.

Another key characteristic of the leaders and the entire executive team of the City was the willingness to take some risks. The GoMonrovia program was not a risk-free venture, so all executives needed to trust the organization was capable of making changes and understand there would be risks associated with that. They were willing to fail and adapt if issues come up. Having transparent conversations about that enabled the program to move quickly from concept to implementation. To illustrate, the leadership team talked to the City Council about the partnerships in January, in February they approved the agreement with Lyft and LimeBike, and everything went live in the middle of March. This implied a great effort by all the organization, but they were aligned and had the capacity to shift gears quickly and prioritize this initiative. Internally it was an intense time, in which all teams were working on the details of the rollout. Publicly, the implementation was almost seamless.

Getting Started

With the increasing development interest in the Southern California region, the suburban community of Monrovia is becoming denser and more congested. Aware of this trend and interested in enabling economic and social development, the City of Monrovia started to think about how to address the new mobility challenges.

The City leadership examined the local resources and the existing mobility services in the context of a nationwide decreasing in public transit ridership. In their perspective, transportation modes that do not incorporate technology will fall behind share mobility options such as Uber and Lyft, which are using it to provide on-demand service and connect people faster (usually) than traditional public transit options. So, instead of competing, the City explored how they could leverage the widely adopted technology platforms to facilitate a new public transportation model for the Monrovia suburban community.

That is how the idea of the partnerships with Lyft and LimeBike came up. That option allowed the City to use their resources towards something that was already working right, and that addressed some of the parking and traffic related issues. The GoMonrovia program offers people access to a Lyft ride anywhere in the GoMonrovia service area for just $0.50, and bike rides on one of the more 200 LimeBike's dockless

bikes for $1.00 per 30 minutes use. The program did not require high levels of investment. Most infrastructure was there, so it has been about changing behavior little by little.

Building Connections

When choosing its partners, the City looked for those companies with whom they could really work together and that recognize the role of both public transit and emerging services in the new mobility landscape. It was very important for the team to build collaborative partnerships, in which they could build a share vision and work alongside on challenges and solutions.

For the ride-sharing service, Lyft proved the most suitable, adopting a more flexible and collaborative approach. The perception of the City was that Lyft looks to be part of the transportation mobility ecosystem in a way that complement public transit while improving people's lives and reducing overall greenhouse gas emissions, as evidenced by their commitment to purchase carbon offsets to make every ride carbon neutral as of April 2018.

On the bike share side, the City chose LimeBike after considering several firms. As it is based on the U.S., LimeBike has robust privacy protection rules and was really engaged with the idea of the partnership and able to collaborate in creating solutions. As this was a new service, the City expected some challenges and LimeBike was flexible and willing to adapt the program to address potential issues and incorporate learnings. The company defined one person as the main contact with the City, so they can call him directly if there is any problem and he take care of any issue on the ground. The City also built a robust and close relationship with LimeBike's rebalancing team, to test different things on the ground, adjust the number of bikes that are deployed and avoid bike clutter around the city.

Regarding data sharing, with both Lyft and LimeBike there have been push and pulls. Again, the City's team has used a practical approach to get things done. Knowing that all the data shared with cities is public, which private companies do not like, they did not seek for an open data agreement but asked for the specific data that they need to develop future planning and analysis. In that way, Lyft and LimeBike have shared large amounts of information in an aggregated and anonymous level. For the City of Monrovia, although it would be nice to have more granular level data, that has been enough to effectively incorporate it into its planning process.

On the bike side, LimeBike has given the City access to their internal system to monitor in real time how many rides are occurring, the areas in where the rides are starting and ending, what are the highest use areas, and how many hours and miles have been ridden.

With Lyft, there are ongoing conversations about how they can share more information valuable for planning. Until now, the company has given data on a census track basis. The City is trying get better data on overall number of rides that are going to key areas, such as train stations or the city downtown, and on which are the highest use areas for pick up or drop off.

All the information gathered by the City is public. To the agencies that ask for it, data is shared in an aggregated level, utilizing metrics such as the number of people using the programs or the total number of rides starting in different census tracks.

Program Implementation

The implementation process was quick -it took around three months. The City's team worked intensely with partners and internal departments during the early 2018 on the approvals, contracts, marketing and rollout.

A crucial and time-consuming task was to negotiate the details of the Lyft and the LimeBike partnerships with both entities. Besides agreeing on the terms, internally the City had to ensure the funding before signing the contracts. As part of the L.A. County, Monrovia has four different revenue streams that are restricted for transportation related uses. From these streams, they were spending about $1 million a year to operate the dial-a-ride program. They decided to shift that funding to the GoMonrovia program, for which the City Manager's Office had to work with its county partners to execute that shift and reallocate the payment to the partnerships.

Another important step was to develop the rollout and marketing plan, which also took some resources. The communication campaign was crucial for residents to know the program and learn how to use it. The City's team worked with the Public Works department to make sure that the identified areas for bike deployment were properly rolled out, and coordinated all the administrative stuff associated with transitioning from the previous dial-a-ride to the new GoMonrovia program.

The team also had to deal with some technical and operational challenges, such as how to provide access to the program for the people who do not have a smartphone. For that, the City kept its dial-a-ride program in a smaller scale, focused on people without smartphones or with ADA-related needs and reducing the fare to match the fare on Lyft rides. The biggest challenge, however, has been meeting the increasing demand, that has reached higher levels that those expected initially. The program is taking more time than expected to manage, and new funding sources and some design modifications are needed to ensure the services keep working and meeting quality standards.

Evaluating success

Ridership and the associated cost of trip are the main measures of success used by the City of Monrovia. The historic dial-a-ride program cost about $1 million a year and facilitated 30,000 rides annually. With similar spending, the Lyft program has reached 30,000 rides a month and more than 2,700 people have signed up for LimeBike.

The City's team is conscious that high ridership that does not necessarily means decreasing vehicles miles traveled. But for now, in this first stage of the program, their primarily focus is on giving people the option to get around. Additionally, the City sees that the program has had a positive impact on reducing the demand for parking space.

In terms of bike rides, the fact that thousands of rides have been made by bike is a great sign for the city. As many suburban communities, Monrovia does not have a lot of bike infrastructure to allow for easy bike use all throughout town, so both the City and LimeBike were expectant to the results.

Communication, Outreach and Marketing

The City did a great amount of initial marketing and outreach. In the partnership experiences that they studied all throughout the country, they noticed and heard consistently that most times ridership was very low. Both marketing efforts and the design of the program were identified as the main factors behind that.

Therefore, the City of Monrovia spent a lot of time thinking about the program design, who would use the program, and how to make it very easy for customers to use so that they can get anywhere they want within a defined service area. On the marketing side, they designed a coordinated and loud rollout. Resources were deployed all over town. As LimeBike uses a lime green color for their bicycles, bright and visible lime green banners were hung throughout town and lime green paint was added to several key locations where bikes were placed. The City also partnered with a marketing design firms to develop unique signs to promote the program. The campaign covered all the city, although it was focused on the highest visibility areas in town, such as the downtown and transit stations, where the marketing efforts were very thoughtful. For example, at strategic points in transit stations, decals were deployed on the ground where people walk through when they are getting off the train illustrating the way to get to the bike rack section and to Lyft pick up zones, with instructions on how to access the services everywhere.

The City's team also spent time simplifying complicated messages, in order to make them easily to absorb and people understood how the program works. They did additional efforts to reach elder people, talking with the two senior clubs about the transition, and existing riders of the dial-a-ride program to explain the new program.

After three month of operation and a successful reception from the public, the City is now developing educational outreach sessions with Lyft and LimeBike to share what they are doing with other cities in the region. Informally, the team is also sharing its experiences with different agencies, NGOs and other municipalities that have reached out to them to understand how the program works and how to set it up.

Challenges ahead

Currently, the biggest challenge ahead is the overwhelming demand for the program. The City was not expecting the level of ridership that both the Lyft and LimeBike programs have had, so they must think about how to sustain the programs in time. That includes how the City and its partners adapt the design and operation, how they manage the programs, how they ensure the funding, and how to move forward in a way that is environmentally friendly.