

Access to data needed for seamless mobility in Metro Vancouver

With ride-hailing on the horizon, now is the time to plan for moving people using mobility as a service.

JENNIFER SALTMAN ([HTTPS://VANCOUVERSUN.COM/AUTHOR/JENSALTMAN](https://vancouver.sun.com/author/jensaltman)) Updated: August 6, 2019

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Imagine being able to plan and pay for a trip from the suburbs of Metro Vancouver to Downtown Vancouver using multiple services

like bike share, ride-hailing and transit, all from a single app on your mobile phone.

Open data sharing will be key to allowing the region's residents to take advantage of such technology, known as mobility as a service, or MaaS, according to experts.

"With MaaS, the idea, literally, is knitting together the various modes collectively so you as a commuter can have a seamless, easy experience going between modes or choosing which modes to use as you take an individual trip or go about your whole day," said David Zipper, an urban mobility consultant who is based in Washington, D.C.

Zipper said that from what he's seen and experienced, Metro has a lot going for it when it comes to MaaS and integrated mobility, in that it's relatively easy to navigate large parts of the region without using a personal vehicle, but instead relying on bikes, car shares and transit.

"I think lots of people in Vancouver have decided not to own a personal vehicle or decided they don't need a second one," he said.

With ride-hailing companies likely to enter the market later this year — they will be allowed to apply to the Passenger Transportation Board to operate this fall — it will become even easier to get around without owning a vehicle.

Getting all of those options into one app isn't something that will happen quickly or easily.

Companies like Uber and Lyft are reluctant to share data — unless compelled by governments — and prefer to use their own platforms to link transportation options, a practice Zipper said can be dangerous.

If MaaS is provided by large private entities, they can have a virtual monopoly over a city's transportation information and can decide what services are shown and to what extent they're included in

search results and dominate price strategy. It's known as a digital "walled garden."

"From an economics perspective, the challenge once a city is dominated by one or two providers is the city is basically hijacked — all public and private transportation is in the hands of one international organization," said Hendrick Wolff, Simon Fraser University associate economics professor. "How to get around it it would be to have another model, but you have more competition and free entry."

Wolff said this could be mitigated by government requiring all companies in the market to have open-data policies that share information like vehicle locations, pricing and more, so aggregator apps can feature a variety of mobility services and make bookings for users.

"Right now that's not possible because some companies don't share data," Wolff said. "They all want to be their own aggregator, they all want to be the one-stop platform."

The head of TransLink said there is a role for Metro's transit agency to play in MaaS, somewhere between standing on the sidelines and simply sharing data, which TransLink has been doing for years, and creating its own platform.

"We are thinking about the continuum, absolutely," said CEO Kevin Desmond. "I would expect we'll be somewhere in the middle, where we're helping to facilitate the creation of really good applications."

In addition to having open access to data, Zipper said it will also be important to talk to people and ask them why they use the transportation methods they do and what could make their travels easier.

"I think it's really important that TransLink at least elevate these questions for local residents now, because you don't yet have ride-hailing and scooters like so many of your peer cities across North America, so ask now so you can try to avoid some of the mistakes

that other cities have made and have your strategy be presented upfront,” Zipper said.

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