MPR News | Minnesota Now Hourcar, Waymo, Green Line changes shaping the future of Twin Cities transportation 01M61TSYKM8KX54JBE572ANRM9

NINA MOINI: Getting around the Twin Cities without your own car could look pretty different in the coming years. A car-sharing service that gave people an alternative to owning a vehicle shut down this month. Meanwhile, Minneapolis and St. Paul are wrestling with whether to allow driverless taxis. And the long-awaited Green Line extension is getting ready to open next summer after years-long delays.

So what do these changes mean for the future of the transportation scene in the metro? Here to help us connect the dots is Bill Lindeke. He's an urban studies lecturer at the University of Minnesota and a longtime observer of transportation here in the Twin Cities. Welcome to *Minnesota Now,* Bill.

BILL LINDEKE: Thanks for having me on, Nina.

NINA MOINI: Thanks. There's so much interest in this. Thanks for doing this. Let's start with HOURCAR and Evie, OK? These car-sharing services, for folks who are not familiar, they officially shut down a couple weeks ago after about 20 years-- wow-- in the Twin Cities. What did these services, Bill, provide that people can't easily get from other transportation options? Will you give us a sense of that loss for people who maybe don't own a car or have access otherwise?

BILL LINDEKE: Yeah, they were sort of liberation for people that can make most of their trips by transit or by biking or walking. But then we live in a big, sprawling metro area, and there's always a few things that you just can't get to somewhere on transit. So that's when HOURCAR is the lifesaver. It's like a backup for people who are otherwise able to get around and go to the grocery store and go to work pretty easily.

There was two different systems. One of them, they were always parked in the same spot. And the other one, you could rent and go on a trip and then just leave it parked on the street. But it was really surprising and sad that it just closed without much announcement, sort of suddenly, and left hundreds of people stranded without their safety net.

NINA MOINI: And HOURCAR and Evie, they cited rising insurance costs and funding problems when they closed. How difficult is it to make car-sharing work as a business? There's a high demand, clearly. But is it a difficult business to make work?

BILL LINDEKE: Yeah, I think the insurance costs-- like how do you predict what's going to happen with that? And it's funny because--

NINA MOINI: Yeah, who's in the driver's seat? [LAUGHS]

BILL LINDEKE: Yeah, and I don't know why insurance costs are escalating so much. There's a lot of things in the economy right now that are seemingly out of control, and that's one of them. But the irony here is that gas prices are also very high. So these are electric vehicles, and they're exactly the kind of thing that people in the Twin Cities depend on so that they don't have to go broke filling cars with gas or buying another car. And so it's really a kind of ironic tragedy that HOURCAR shuts down during this economic problem time.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, it's multiple blows for transportation for folks, depending on how they get around. For the city of St. Paul's part, the city owns the leases on the cars that made up the HOURCAR fleet. And so those cars are now in storage in a city lot. And both Minneapolis and St. Paul are currently trying to figure out what to do with the chargers installed throughout the cities to charge EVs.

So we just got word, Bill, that St. Paul Mayor Kaohly Her is holding a news conference tomorrow about the future of EV carshare in the Twin Cities. Could the cities transfer these cars and chargers into a different car-sharing model? We obviously don't know what this announcement will be yet. I don't want to make you guess. But what are some of the routes that they could go?

BILL LINDEKE: Well, you really need sustainable funding source. The city of St. Paul has a significant budget deficit this year, as does Minneapolis and a lot of local government. So I think the state needs to step in, or the Met Council or something regional, to rescue this investment that we've made over many, many years, building out the system and installing those electric chargers all throughout the city of St. Paul and Minneapolis and a few other spots. There was even a grant recently to extend it out to Woodbury. And I would really like to see a regional approach. But I'm excited to see that the mayor of St. Paul is going to announce something. I am guessing it's good news, so I can't wait to find out.

NINA MOINI: And to say, 20 years of a service in the cities, I mean, that's longer than some folks might think.

BILL LINDEKE: Yeah, I was a member back in the 2000s and used HOURCAR to get around for a few years. So it's really been around a long time. I'll miss it if it doesn't get rescued by somebody.

NINA MOINI: Well, we'll see what happens for St. Paul. At least we'll have this announcement tomorrow. And we'll be following that and let folks know, obviously. But I also want to talk about Waymo, driverless taxis. I only heard about this, to be honest, probably in the last six months or so from my team here, from our producers. The company's been testing its vehicles in the Twin Cities. It hasn't started offering rides to passengers.

These are driverless taxis. And so the Minneapolis City Council passed an ordinance requiring a human safety monitor in the driver's seat-- so someone to be there, just in case. But Mayor Jacob Frey vetoed it. I'm curious about your take on the city wrestling with allowing these vehicles in the city. Is that expected when introducing something like this?

BILL LINDEKE: I think that Waymo, and AV technology, in general, should be regulated much more tightly than it is these days. There's very few regulations from anybody about controlling what these car companies, these tech companies, can do with their vehicles. But that said, I don't think that the kind of regulation that the city is proposing is necessarily going to solve any problems. I think it just kind of kneecaps a potentially beneficial technology.

Currently, cars are very dangerous. Tens of thousands of people die every year in car crashes. And we need to do something. And AV technology could be a solution to these long, ongoing safety problems, but only if we have somebody who can keep these tech companies honest about how they do their software and what kinds of limits they have on speed, for example. There's lots of things like that that I think we should be looking at.

NINA MOINI: Do you think that that's part of some of this, is maybe a mistrust or a lack of information from some of these companies and how they operate? Or do you think that there's enough regulation and transparency there? I know there's also issues people raise about taking jobs from other forms of Ubers and taxis.

BILL LINDEKE: Yeah, that's a legitimate gripe for sure that current drivers could be made obsolete by AVs, but that is likely to happen regardless eventually, if this technology proves to be effective and safe. But I do think that mistrust of tech companies is a real problem and something that I think we should be much more attuned to. For example, I just learned yesterday that people will charge different amounts of money based on your personal data information that tech companies will have. So if you hired a Lyft and I hired a Lyft at the same time, going to the same place, you might get different prices. And this is the kind of thing that I think is alarming, and it's happening in this example.

NINA MOINI: So Autonomous Vehicles-- AVs we talked about-- I also want to cover the Green Line extension, because I mean, people might be taking it if they can't get around in other ways. It's a 14-mile extension of the train that will add 16 stops between Minneapolis and Eden Prairie, the suburb of Eden Prairie. It faced years of construction. Folks may remember delays since breaking ground back in 2018. And it's projected to cost nearly $3 billion, with a B, more than double the original projected cost. Whoa. [LAUGHS] We recently got news of an official opening date, June 12, 2027. Bill, first, can you give listeners some background on some of the stalling and all of this different money, why it's taken so long to get this going?

BILL LINDEKE: There were a lot of unforeseen issues. When the route was originally chosen, I think, 10 years ago, people at the time, Hennepin County Rail Authority and Hennepin County Board, decided that it would be more effective and easier and faster and cheaper to run it along an old rail corridor that goes west of the uptown and wedge areas, west of the lakes. Turns out that was a big mistake, and they instead had to negotiate with railroads. They had to stabilize a condo tower. They had to build a very expensive tunnel underneath a stream. And it's an elaborate engineering situation that people didn't foresee. And so it's kind of a--

NINA MOINI: There were a lot of challenges, yeah. But it's nice to have, that this will finally, hopefully, be open, and it'll give people more opportunities to get around. Bill, I just wonder if you were to give maybe a grade or an overview of just how you feel about how all of these different strings that we pulled on here of the EVs and Waymo and the Green Line extension. What does it tell us about where Twin Cities' transportation is headed? Or is it becoming easier for people to get around without a car? Or is it still falling short?

BILL LINDEKE: Well, the high gas prices are really lurking in the background of all of this. And I think it proves how much we need transit and transit investments in the United States. So people have an alternative to sitting and putting oil into their car all the time. But honestly, Twin Cities is better off than most places around the country right now. It's a really hard time in government to do investments like this because of very many things, the federal government being the worst offender. But the Twin Cities, in 2023, passed some stable funding for transit. And so I'm cautiously optimistic that things will be improving in the next few years.

NINA MOINI: Bill, thanks so much for your perspective. We appreciate your time.

BILL LINDEKE: Thanks, Nina.

NINA MOINI: Thanks. That was Bill Lindeke, an urban studies lecturer at the University of Minnesota.