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Subway Ridership Declines in New York. Is Uber to Blame?

By EMMA G. FITZSIMMONS FEB. 23, 2017

After a period of soaring subway demand in New York City, ridership dropped last year, and transit officials say the rise of Uber and other car service apps may be partly to blame.

Annual subway ridership fell slightly in 2016 for the first time since 2009, according to statistics from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Weekday ridership was at its highest level since 1948, but weekend ridership fell about 3 percent, suggesting that New Yorkers and tourists were finding other ways to get around.

The authority's acting chairman, Fernando Ferrer, said on Thursday that several factors could be contributing to the decline: rising subway delays, the popularity of Uber and other apps, and weekend maintenance work that disrupts service.

"It may be all of the above," Mr. Ferrer told reporters after an authority board meeting. "I'm very glad that our ridership is at historic highs. If it declines a little bit — and I've seen those numbers, and it's a little bit — there is no reason for alarm."

But others worry that if passengers continue to abandon the subway, it could have broad implications for the city and worsen traffic congestion.

"The secret to success in New York City over the last 20 years is the transit system's ability to absorb the growth in travel from population and economic growth," said Bruce Schaller, a former senior official at the city's Transportation Department. "If

all that growth translated into more use of private cars or taxis and Ubers, it's not a sustainable way to grow the city."

Mr. Schaller, who worked on a prominent traffic study released by Mayor Bill de Blasio's administration last year, is finishing a new report on the growth of ride-hailing apps like Uber. Mr. Schaller found that ridership in New York of Uber and other apps had tripled to about 16 million passengers in October 2016, from about five million in June 2015. Mr. Schaller is a consultant and said the report was an independent analysis to help inform the debate over for-hire vehicles.

On the subway, annual ridership fell about 0.3 percent last year to 1.756 billion trips, according to the authority. But don't celebrate roomier trains quite yet — the system is still teeming with more than six million riders on some weekdays.

The new figures come at a time when both the subway system and Uber are facing problems that could influence how New Yorkers make transportation decisions. Subway delays have more than doubled in the past five years, and trains are more frequently breaking down.

As riders fume over worsening service, on Thursday several members of the transportation authority board criticized Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, who effectively controls the agency, for cutting \$65 million in state aid to the M.T.A. in his executive budget. But Mr. Cuomo's office has argued that overall state funding for the authority, including tax revenue, would increase by about \$30 million. Officials at the authority said the funding changes would not lead to fare and toll increases or service changes.

At the same time, some New Yorkers have deleted Uber over concerns that the company tried to profit during airport protests last month against President Trump's immigration order, as well as the ties the company's chief executive, Travis Kalanick, had to Mr. Trump. This week, a former Uber engineer called attention to sexual harassment and other problems at the company, leading to more negative headlines. Uber has said it is investigating the accusations.

One Uber user, DePaul Vaughn, said that after the airport controversy he deleted the app from his phone.

“I felt like I wanted to be supporting companies that are aligned with my values,” Mr. Vaughn said as he waited for an R train in Brooklyn on Thursday morning.

Mr. Vaughn, 37, who works in the advertising industry, said he takes the subway to work but sometimes avoids it on the weekends.

“There’s been a lot of work on the train,” he said. “A lot of times, it’s a headache.”

A spokeswoman for Uber, Alix Anfang, said the company took pride in serving neighborhoods that lack good access to public transit. Its lower-cost car pool option, UberPool, helps New Yorkers get to bus, subway and ferry lines, she said.

“Uber’s mission is to provide reliable, affordable transportation to everyone, everywhere,” Ms. Anfang said in a statement.

Other New Yorkers rely on bicycles or private cars. Citi Bike, the bicycle-sharing program, set a ridership record in 2016 with nearly 14 million trips — an increase of about four million trips compared with 2015.

Suzy Bal, a Brooklyn resident, was so fed up with the subway that she bought a car. She commutes on the subway during the week and drives on the weekend, she said.

“I was tired of taking the train all the time, everywhere I wanted to go,” she said.

Ms. Bal, 27, said she used Uber on weekends if she expected to drink alcohol, but she avoided the subway.

“The train traffic is horrible on the weekends,” she said on Thursday, surveying the Fourth Avenue-Ninth Street station in Park Slope. “Also, it’s just so dirty.”

Bus ridership also dropped last year — part of a downward trend over the last decade or so. Weekday bus ridership fell about 1.6 percent last year to just under 2 million riders. Weekend bus ridership fell about 4 percent last year to under 2.2 million riders.

The city's transportation commissioner, Polly Trottenberg, who also serves on the authority's board, said the city wanted to work with the agency to improve bus service. She said there were several ideas that could make riding the bus easier, including being able to board at any door and establishing more bus lanes.

"Dedicated bus lanes take some political work and community engagement," Ms. Trottenberg said, "but those are all solutions we know we can do."

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