

Universal Basic Mobility Is Coming. And It's Long Overdue

People need easy access to work and to essential services to live decent, independent lives. Cities need Universal Basic Mobility. It's a human right.



A tram in Helsinki, where Mobility as a Service plans are administered through the app, Whim. // Pekka Sakki/AP



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Universal Basic Income (UBI) has long been talked about as a way to address income inequality, but there's a solution that directly stimulates employment: Universal Basic Mobility (UBM), by simply getting people to jobs. In areas where commutes are long, it's hard for children to escape poverty, and in many cities, areas with poor mobility have high unemployment and low incomes. The right to freedom of movement precedes the U.S. Constitution and is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: It's not merely a human right, it's the foundation of a healthy economy.

Universal Basic Mobility would be a system of partnerships and/or policies that provide a minimum level of mobility to all members of society. An isolated,

static population is unhealthy, unproductive and unhappy. A mobile population is economically, culturally, and socially dynamic. UBM can harness automation and new mobility platforms to accelerate economic growth, providing everyone with access to employment and the means to improve their quality of life.

We expect UBM in the United States to emerge from a new trend called Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS). MaaS is the transportation equivalent of Netflix: a monthly subscription fee gives you access to multiple mobility services on a single platform. The dominant form of mobility over the last 50 years in the U.S. has been privately owned cars, but over the last few years, especially in large cities—new mobility services have emerged: ride-hailing services, bikeshare, and carshare. MaaS plans are emerging that will offer all these services, on a subscription basis.

MaaS is currently being tested by three major U.S. ridesharing companies. Via offers ViaPass, and Uber and Lyft offer shared passes. These companies are also expanding to incorporate more forms of transportation: Uber acquired JUMP (electric bikes) and has announced plans to integrate public transit to become a true mobility

platform, and Lyft acquired Motivate (bikeshare) and is beginning to add public transit in certain cities.

For a basic user, MaaS plan pricing resembles smartphone plan pricing. The most fully realized MaaS plan is Whim in Helsinki, Finland, that charges approximately \$50 per month for limited service including public transit, bikeshare, and limited ridesharing; and \$500 per month for full ridesharing service that replaces personal car ownership. MaaS could significantly drive down the amount people—especially urban residents—pay to travel over the course of a year, because while personal cars sit idle 95 percent of the time, shared cars and bikes get much higher utilization—creating efficiencies and cost savings.

A hypothetical UBM policy today could provide a credit allowing everyone to access a combination of MaaS choices over a period of time—a plan might include 10 public transit rides, 10 bikeshare or e-scooter trips, and one shared taxi trip under five miles; another policy might allow everyone to choose a certain dollar value of whatever combination of choices suits their needs.



A combination of mobility choices will be available in UBM

As the cost drops, access to transport mobility will seem like a right, like internet and phone connectivity. While it may sound farfetched, think of the early days of mobile phones and broadband: For a number of years universal service was limited to landlines, while mobile and internet were considered specialty services; only some people had them and few thought access to the technology a right. But as prices dropped, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 laid the groundwork for expanding universal access from landline phones to broadband Internet and mobile phones. Now at least \$10 per month of “lifeline” phone

and data subsidies are available to low-income people nationwide — some states offer even more.

The logic is powerful: Just like connectivity, mobility provides essential access to job opportunities, family, and serves basic needs like food, shelter, and medical care. Just as you can’t get a job if you don’t have a phone for an interview, you can’t get to an in-person interview without mobility—or to and from work once you’re hired.

A right to mobility doesn’t mean free mobility for everyone, but there are strong incentives to make at least some services free, like public transit. Estonia has implemented free public transit nationally, and Paris is studying it. In cities with free public transit, a common theme is that the collective benefits of encouraging its use by everyone—enabling cities to reduce traffic, pollution, and parking in central areas—outweigh the relatively low cost of providing it to everyone.

For bikeshare and e-scooters, the collective benefits are the same and operating costs are potentially even lower. Because of the potential environmental benefits, it would be wise for governments to extend UBM benefits to everyone rather than solely to low-income citizens.

How far should UBM plans allow you to travel? Ultimately, this is going to be a region-specific question that also relates to the cost of different mobility services. The mobility experience is local, and policy must be responsive at that level. It needs to provide access to jobs, as well as essential goods and services like healthy food, medical care, and banking.

UBM also provides a “safety net” against disastrous loss of mobility, and the employment consequences. A major problem with areas that depend on personal car mobility is that it’s all-or-nothing. When someone loses their car or driver’s license, the consequences are profound—including job loss and poverty.

How might UBM be implemented?

We see at least three ways: municipal partnerships with mobility companies, municipal policy, and federal policy.

There are a few current municipal programs headed in the direction of providing UBM. The small city of Monrovia in Los Angeles County created its own MaaS plan called

GoMonrovia, replacing its local public transit dial-a-ride service with subsidized Lime bikes and Lyft rides; long-distance travelers are expected to transfer to L.A. Metro or Foothill Transit. Larger cities may be able to set UBM policies across all mobility providers. Oakland, California, is currently asking e-scooter companies to create an unlimited use plan for low-income residents. The city has proposed \$5 per year for unlimited rides.

The time is ripe for the emergence of a nonprofit group to coordinate these efforts, pushing towards national Universal Basic Mobility. Because mobility providers are currently subject to state and municipal regulators rather than a national regulator like the FCC (chartered to ensure universal access) national nonprofit groups should work to negotiate and coordinate more uniform policies and national marketing strategies, much like EveryoneOn does for universal broadband internet.

In urban transportation, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) is charged with “maximiz[ing] the safe, secure, and efficient mobility of individuals.” Some of its research programs—like the Mobility-On-Demand Sandbox—point in the right direction, but it would take a major change in the FTA to make UBM a priority.

To evaluate UBM programs, policymakers will need high quality data for decision making. Public access to mobility data can be secured through a data registry or through commercially available services like TransitScreen’s MobilityScore, which turn big data about supply, demand, and access to all forms of mobility into maps and analytics. Open real-time data will also be critical to creating an efficient mobility marketplace.

UBM gives us a single framework for talking about the future of urban mobility. Currently, a variety of public policies recognize the importance of basic mobility: free and subsidized public transit, paratransit, and free bikeshare or e-scooter programs for low-income groups. UBM combines all of these different conversations into a single conceptual framework.

In the long run, UBM will be affordable enough that the public or even private sector could fund it. UBM is a highly targeted investment that gives everyone a better chance at being meaningfully employed and participating in the economy. Cities that enact UBM will prosper, while cities that don’t will fall behind.

About the Authors



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