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RESEARCH REPORT

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# Influential Factors in the Formation of Partnerships Between Ridehail Companies and Public Transportation

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**16. Abstract**

In response to the increasing presence of ridehail services, namely Uber and Lyft, a growing number of transit agencies have formed partnerships with these and other shared-use mobility companies to offer programs that integrate these services with traditional transit. The programs often start as pilots and typically involve subsidizing ridehail travel for passengers connecting to public transit routes or travelling at times that public transit offers limited or no service (such as late at night). However, the number of transit agencies forming these partnerships is still small, and transit agencies note concerns over liability and costs, as well as the ability to meet federal standards, and many worry partnerships may not be a good use of public resources. Transit agencies face a number of service challenges, and partnering with ridehail companies likely offers a piece of the puzzle to improving public transit. Future work should expand on this study and focus on the question of long-term funding. Even those partnerships that have had some apparent success may not have fail-safe funds to keep these partnerships, and other new models of service such as connecting with bikeshare or other on-demand services.

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## Disclaimer

# Influential Factors in the Formation of Partnerships Between Ridehail Companies and Public Transportation

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# Executive Summary

# Executive Summary

In response to the increasing presence of ridehail services, namely Uber and Lyft, a growing number of transit agencies have begun to form partnerships with these and other shared-use mobility companies to offer programs that integrate these services with traditional transit. The programs often start as pilots and typically involve subsidizing ridehail travel for passengers connecting to public transit routes or travelling at times that public transit offers limited or no service (such as late at night). However, the number of transit agencies forming these partnerships is still small, and other agencies note concerns over liability and costs, as well as the ability to meet federal standards.

We collected survey data over two years, and conducted several interviews with transit agencies, focusing on what leads to the formation of partnerships between transit agencies and ridehail companies, and what barriers exist. In this report we focus on recent data collected primarily from transit agencies that have not formed partnerships with the aim of identifying factors necessary for partnerships to form and lead to programs that benefit both transit agencies and their passengers.

Our results suggest the following:

1. The primary challenges facing transit agencies include providing late night services, first and last mile access, the costs of service, how to increase ridership, and addressing low performing routes.
2. Transit agencies face challenges similar to those that shared-use mobility partnerships aim to resolve, but agencies that have not partnered remain undecided on how to address these challenges.
3. Transit providers are aware of these partnerships and many have had internal discussions about partnering with a shared-use mobility company.
4. The main concerns with forming a partnership include issues over data-sharing, cost effectiveness and driver drug and alcohol testing. There were also concerns expressed over smartphone accessibility, vehicle accessibility (ADA compliance), and liability issues.
5. Most transit agencies without partnerships are moderately supportive of partnering with ridehail services but they also perceive differences in the attitudes among their different stakeholders.
6. Although the sample size here is small, our preliminary analysis supports our hypothesis that the presence of a policy entrepreneur (e.g., a "Transit Champion") is an important factor for partnership formation.

Our data indicates that transit agencies are very concerned about the cost-effectiveness of these partnerships. Thus, even if transit agencies have favorable attitudes towards shared-use mobility companies, they still worry partnering with them may not be a good use of public resources, or may not solve their challenges. During our interviews, multiple transit agencies emphasized this point and stated that they are still unconvinced that these partnerships resolve transit agencies' problems, or at least are not cost-effective. For now, transit agencies face a number of service challenges, and partnerships with ridehail companies likely offers some piece of the puzzle to improving public transit. It is a challenge for policy makers to find meaningful ways to make this option one that can be pursued by any transit agency that sees it as a viable solution to existing challenges.

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# Introduction

In response to the increasing presence of ridehail services, such as Uber and Lyft, a growing number of transit agencies have formed partnerships with these and other shared-use mobility companies to offer programs that integrate these new services with traditional transit. The programs often start as pilots and typically involve subsidizing ridehail travel for passengers connecting to public transit routes or travelling at times that public transit offers limited or no service (such as late at night). However, the number of transit agencies forming these partnerships is still small, and agencies note concerns over liability and costs, as well as the ability to meet federal standards as potential barriers to pursuing these kinds of partnerships.

Although researchers have devoted considerable effort to understanding the costs and benefits of these programs, little attention has been paid to the factors that influence partnership formation; that is, why some transit agencies pursue these programs while others do not.

This study aims to better assess the issues and barriers experienced by transit agencies that influence their decision to form (or not form) these types of partnerships, and to implement a pilot or longer-term program as a result. This report provides an overview and preliminary analysis of factors that influence transit agencies to partner with transportation network companies (TNC's), micro transit, or other private transit services.

Formally, our two inter-related research questions are as follows:

1. Do transit agencies partner with shared-use mobility companies to resolve transit challenges, or do they have other motives, like showing innovation?
2. What factors influence partnership formation, and why do some transit agencies adopt the partnership model while others do not?

To investigate these questions, we developed and implemented a survey with transit agency professionals. Importantly, we sampled transit agencies both with and without ridehail partnerships. To the best of our knowledge, no existing study has incorporated transit agencies without partnerships.[1] We believe that by addressing this gap in the literature, we are better able to evaluate the factors that influence partnership formation. Further, by identifying barriers for those agencies that have not formed partnerships we may inform policies to support the increased prevalence of such partnerships.

[1] Although Curtis et al. (2018) identify obstacles to partnership formation, they do not survey transit agencies without partnerships. In our study, we address this gap by including transit agencies that have not formed partnerships as well as those that have.

# Background

In 2016 the City of Altamonte Springs partnered with Uber to reduce travel costs and increase efficiency for residents. Similarly, when the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority in Pinellas County Florida proposed cuts to existing bus routes, citizens demanded a means to connect between Pinellas Park and East Lake (Polzin and Sperling 2016). In response, the transit agency also partnered with Uber and began a new pilot program that offered a 50 percent subsidy to passengers. Programs like these have since spread all over the United States with varying levels of success.

There are a number of potential public benefits from these programs such as increasing ridership, upgrading transit's public profile, and improving access in areas where it is not feasible to provide fixed route transit, for example in lower density areas, or areas where passengers face first/last mile challenges. In some cases, transit agencies initiate a pilot program to address a certain need — like a low performing route, first and last mile connections, or paratransit services — but in other cases transit agencies experiment to demonstrate innovation. Curtis and co-authors (2019) show that transit agencies partner with shared-use mobility services to provide alternatives to 'park-and-rides,' demonstrate innovation, and increase ridership. Ideally, all of these benefits can be achieved with much lower costs to the transit agency than the costs of fixed route services. These partnerships also benefit ridehail providers as they increase visibility and likely increase the adoption of ridehail. If these partnerships are successful, they could serve as a part of a new model of sustainable, cost-effective, and equitable public transportation.

Despite the potential benefits of shared-use mobility many transit agencies are concerned about their costs, liability issues associated with partnering with a private company, compliance with government regulations, data sharing issues, and compatibility with the TNC "business-to-consumer" model (Curtis et al.2019, p. 7).[2]

[2] Thus far, research indicates that the "crux to developing an effective relationship with a TNC is recognizing that they are technology and marketing companies, not transportation companies" (Westervelt et al. 2017, p. 7).

# Methods

Prior to launching our survey, we conducted informational interviews with participants in a previous study. These interviews helped inform the present survey design. Further, these our interviews offered insights into the challenges faced by transit agencies and how partnerships with shared-use mobility companies help address transit agency goals. Interviewees were asked to discuss challenges within their transit agencies and methods for addressing them. Following these preliminary interviews, invitations to participate in the survey were emailed to 32 transit associations drawn from the American Public Transit Association (APTA) database. As this study continues, we plan to supplement our research by randomly surveying transit agencies from states that were not in the original sample.

## Hypotheses

Initially, we theorized two factors that could impact partnership formation. First, transit agencies equipped with *policy entrepreneurs* would be more likely to pursue pilot programs.

Policy entrepreneurs are individuals that prompt a policy change and propose innovation. They do so by forming coalitions and networking with applicable actors (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; King 1988; Kingdon 1984). Aside from proposing innovative policies, policy entrepreneurs help "identify problems in ways that both attract the attention of decision makers and indicate appropriate policy response (Mintrom 1997)." These individuals are critical because they help promote policies to relevant actors and foster best practices. In the context of transportation policy, we expect policy entrepreneurs to be more likely to propose innovative policy solutions to challenging transit issues. In our interviews, we found initial support for this idea. As such, in our survey we incorporated questions to assess the presence of a policy entrepreneur, the activities of the policy entrepreneur, and the extent to which this individual(s) championed a partnership as a means to achieve transit agency goals or to address agency challenges.

Second, we follow Curtis et al.'s report (2019) on ridehail partnerships and hypothesize that transit agency responses to federal regulations may limit partnership formation. Indeed, in their survey the authors showed that transit agencies are concerned about how private partners would be able to adhere to federal regulations like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), National Transit Database and Title VI requirements, and driver drug and alcohol testing. Interestingly, however, as early as 2016 the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) provided guidelines regarding regulatory compliance and best practices for transit agencies interested in partnerships with TNC's. In 2019, the American Public Transportation Association set up a best practice platform for transit agencies. Yet, it appears that transit agencies are still confused about the applicability of federal regulations to these arrangements. Most notably, in our interviews some transit agencies expressed concern over required drug and alcohol testing, while others were aware that TNC's are exempt from drug and alcohol testing. We noticed similar uncertainty over other federal regulations (e.g., how transit agencies could maintain ADA compliance).

## Preliminary Interviews

To begin, we conducted four semi-structured, one-to-one interviews and one open discussion group interview with members of the California Transit Association (CTA). We used the interviews to inform the questions in our survey. The interviews also provided us with an initial opportunity to evaluate our hypotheses.

The initial interviews took place over the phone and participants were told that we are interested in partnership formation between transit companies and shared mobility services. These interviews allowed participants to voice their opinion(s) as well as their decision calculus in forming partnerships. The interview questions were designed to uncover concerns and barriers to partnership formation. For transit agencies without partnerships, we asked about their challenges and discussed how they had sought to address them.

To gauge how attitudes toward shared mobility companies influence partnership formation, we asked about opinions toward these companies before, during, and after partnership formation. Specifically, we asked participants how these attitudes evolved over time and if any individual(s) within the agency were responsible for these altered attitudes. Finally, we were interested in how transit agencies collect and absorb new information regarding pilot programs. Thus, we asked participants if they contacted other transit agencies to gauge the costs and benefits as well as best practices of a pilot program.

## Survey Administration

In selecting our sample, the goal was to include transit agencies with and without partnerships with ridehail companies. We collected a list of transit associations from the APTA online database and identified 32 transit associations in the United States. The contact information for each transit association was obtained through webpages, apart from the California Transit Authority whose members helped construct the pre-test version of the survey. We sent an email invitation for the survey to executives and/or directors of all the associations we identified. In the email we asked the recipient to forward the survey link to their respective members, emphasizing our particular interest in transit agencies that do not have partnerships.

The survey was open for participation beginning November 1, 2019, and has been ongoing as of March 2020 (although active recruitment has not continued). In the first week, we received several responses as well as emails from transit associations expressing interest in the project and their willingness to forward our survey to their members. We sent out survey reminders by email on November 14, and followed up with phone calls. Despite the apparent enthusiasm from those we contacted, our survey responses indicate it is not likely that any forwarded the invitation to their member agencies, though they did participate in the survey themselves.

## Survey Design

The preliminary interviews informed our survey design. In the interviews, we were able to tease out specific constraints including ADA regulations, data sharing, impacts to unions, and attitudes of the public. Further, the interviews suggested that transit agencies form partnerships for two distinct reasons: (1) to show innovation or (2) to address an existing need. Thus, in our survey we asked respondents without current partnerships to identify their challenges and the menu of options they considered in addressing those concerns. We also incorporated questions regarding potential barriers and questions on how transit agencies addressed these barriers.

The survey was broken down into two main pathways, one for transit agencies with partnerships (Pathway A) and another for transit agencies without partnerships (Pathway B). The survey covered the following topics:

1. Section one introduced the research to participants. It also contained necessary definitions. In this section, we asked respondents if they have ever partnered with a shared-use mobility company. If they answered yes, they were prompted to take Pathway A. If answered no, they were prompted to take Pathway B.
2. Pathway A:
    a. current status of the partnership
    b. concerns regarding shared-use mobility companies as well as attitudes toward different types of shared-use mobility services (e.g., microtransit vs TNC's)
    c. thank you for respondents' time and whether they would be willing to participate in a future study.
3. Pathway B:
    a. existing challenges within their transit agency, attitudes toward shared-use mobility companies as well as concerns regarding partnerships
    b. thank you for respondents' time and whether they would be willing to participate in a future study.

## Analysis

As of March 2020, we have received 24 responses; two of which did not answer any questions, so the total of responses is 22. Of these, 17 were from agencies that did not have partnerships with a ridehail company, and five were from agencies that did. The analysis presented here focuses on the 17 cases that did not have a partnership. Thus, the data in this report complement our previous survey, as well as the work of others that has largely focused on those agencies that have formed partnerships with transit agencies.

Our analysis is limited by both the small sample, and potentially by selection bias; we recruited survey participants from existing transit associations so our sampling frame only included agencies that are members of an association, which could influence their knowledge of partnerships and/or their attitudes related to these partnerships. We do not expect this bias to have a large impact, and in the case of our California Transit Association group interview, we heard from agencies who were both in favor of these partnerships, and those who were not.

The analysis presented here is largely descriptive. In the next phases of this study we will build on this analysis, and produce journal articles based on the data we have collected. In the fall of 2018, we conducted a survey that gathered data from transit agencies that had formed partnerships with transit agencies. This data is summarized in an earlier report (Pike and Kazemian 2019) and is incorporated into the analysis presented here.

# Results

In this section we discuss our key findings. These preliminary results suggest that though all transit agencies face similar challenges, they differ in how they address these challenges.

In our interviews, both transit agencies with and without partnerships, expressed concerns about cost effectiveness, liability, compliance with federal regulations, impacts on union jobs and transit employees, and the ability to provide accessible vehicles. The extent to which these concerns impeded partnership formation depended on the presence of a policy entrepreneur. Consistent with our policy entrepreneur hypothesis, transit agencies equipped with policy entrepreneurs overcame initial obstacles through various efforts (e.g., serving as a liaison between board members and transit staff, calling other transit agencies to assess costs and benefits, sharing contract information, etc.).

In this study, we found that transit agencies without partnerships are concerned about regulatory issues, including drug and alcohol testing, data sharing and general liability (Figure 4). However, these agencies are undecided in how to address these challenges (Figure 2). These results support our initial hypothesis that transit agencies are concerned about government regulations, data sharing, and liability. Turning to our survey responses, we focus on the 17 cases that reported they do not have a partnership.

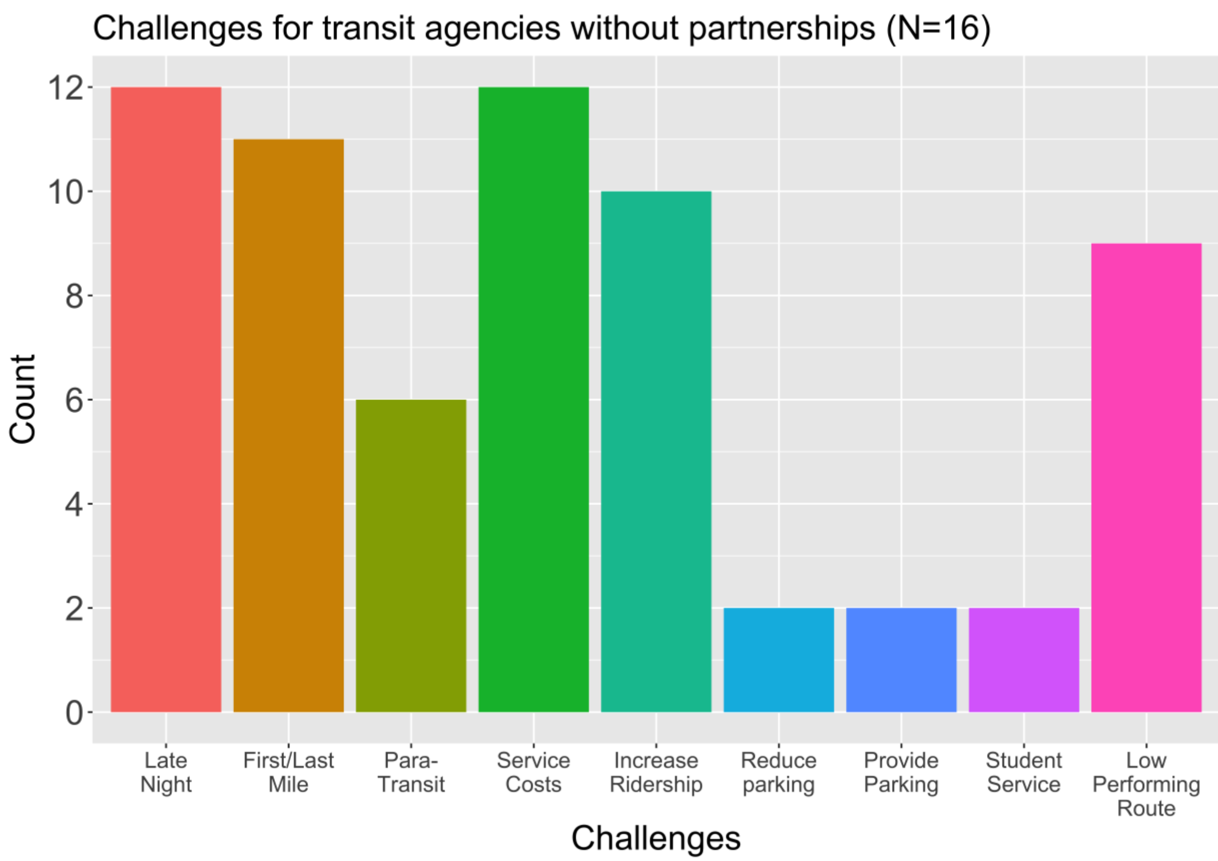


**Figure 1. Challenges for transit agencies without partnerships**

We first asked participants to tell us what challenges they faced within their transit agency. There was some variation in the responses to this question, and respondents were able to select more than one challenge. As shown in Figure 1, most of the survey respondents indicated that the following were current challenges:

- Late night services
- First and last mile transit
- Service costs
- How to increase ridership
- Low performing routes

We compared these responses with our previous survey and found that these responses were similar to the partnership objectives for those agencies with partnerships with ridehail companies (Pike and Kazemian 2019). There, the primary objective was providing first/last mile service (selected by all 8 who answered the question), with four agencies also selecting each of the following objectives: increasing hours, replacing a route, increasing ridership or reducing costs.

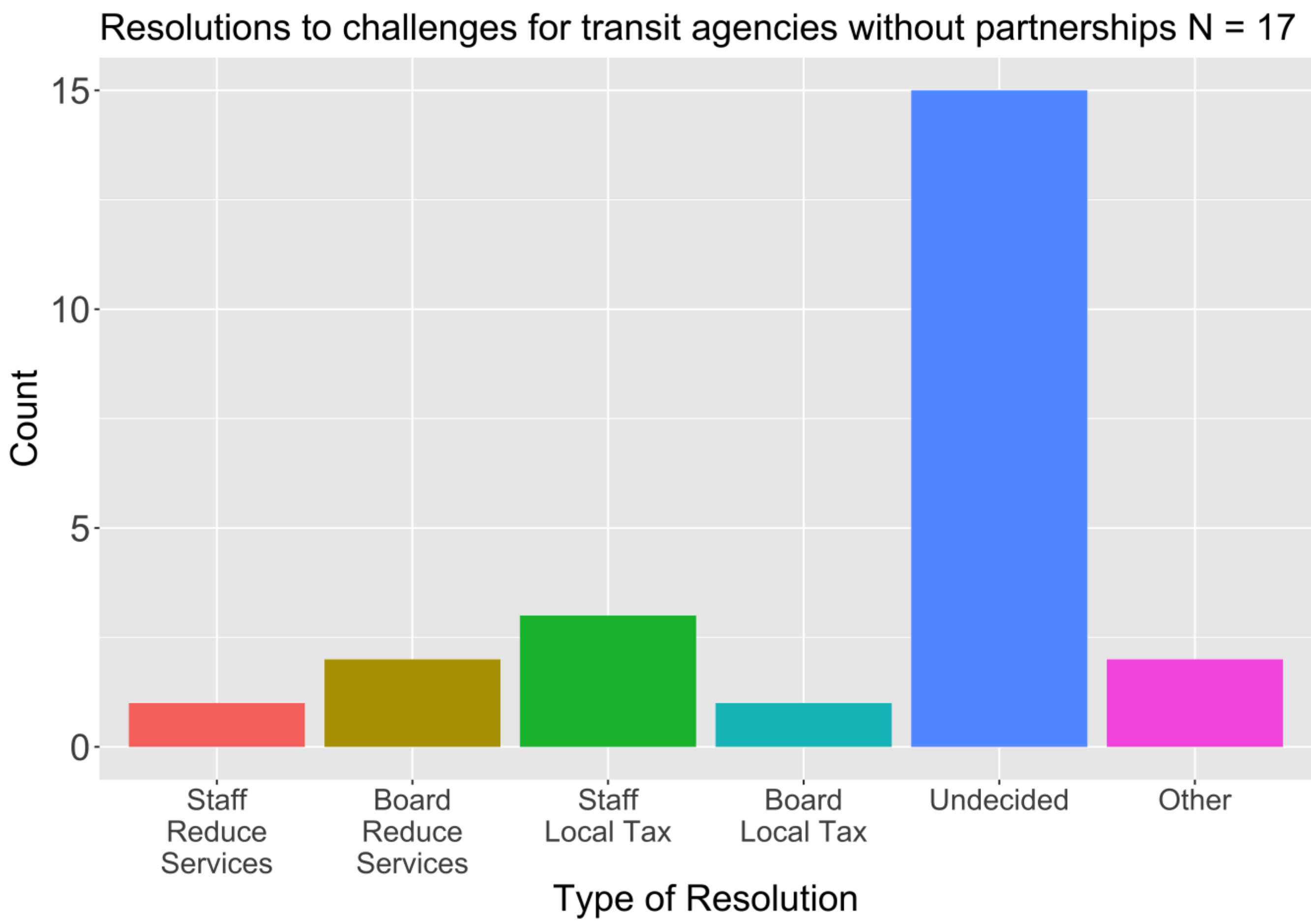


**Figure 2. Resolutions to challenges for transit agencies without partnerships**

We next asked transit agencies without partnerships to tell us how they addressed current challenges. Although our findings suggest that these transit agencies face challenges similar to those that shared-use mobility partnerships aim to resolve, most survey respondents here indicated that they were undecided in how to address these challenges (see Figure 2). One of the reasons that many are undecided is because they are concerned about regulations.

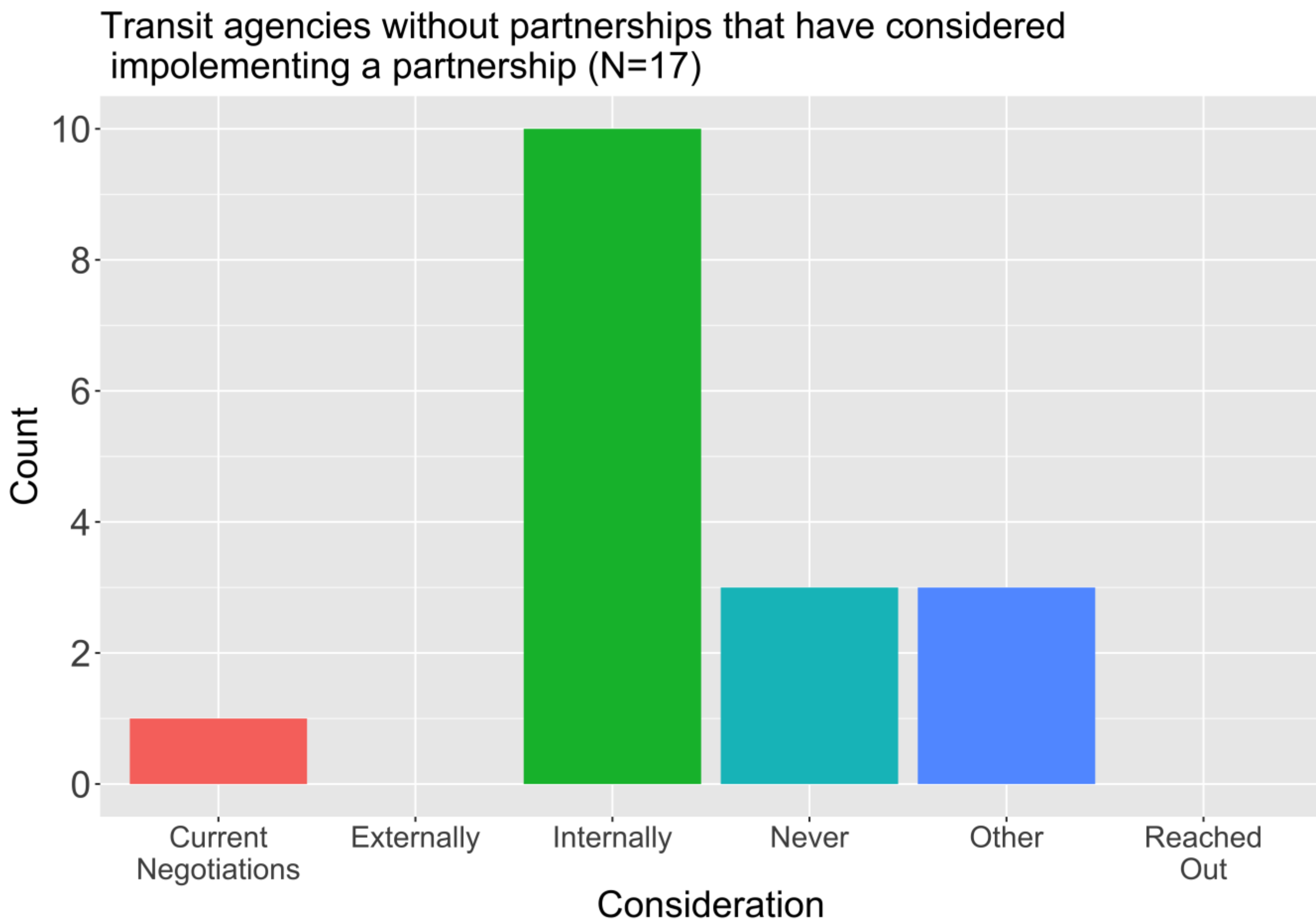


**Figure 3. Transit agencies without partnerships that have considered implementing a partnership**

We also asked transit agencies if they had considered partnering with a shared-use mobility company. The majority of survey respondents indicated that they have had internal discussions about doing so (see Figure 3). In line with our expectations, transit agencies are aware of these programs and have "considered" partnerships to resolve transit challenges.

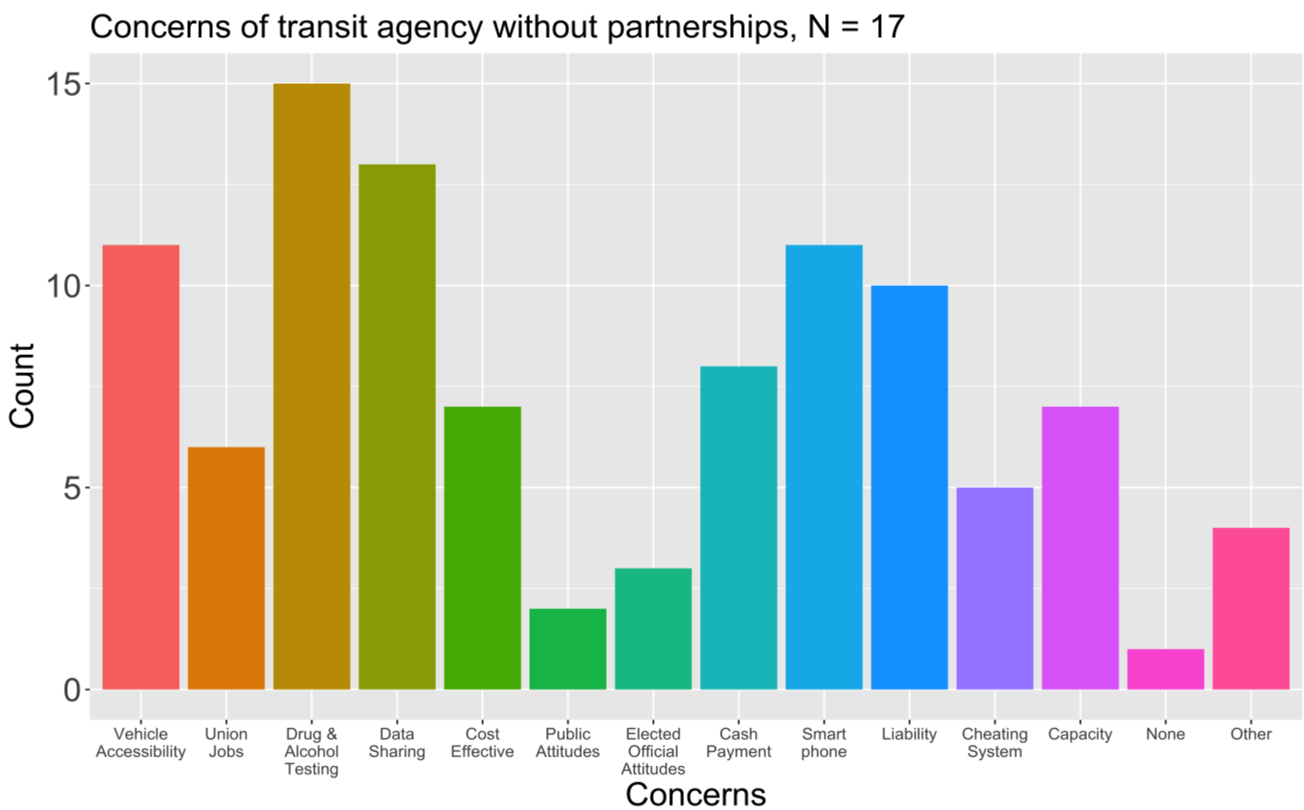


**Figure 4. Concerns of transit agencies without partnerships**

The survey asked respondents to identify any concerns they had regarding shared-use mobility partnerships (see Figure 4). By and large, consistent with our initial hypotheses, respondents most frequently expressed the concerns over the following:

1) Drug and alcohol testing
2) Data sharing
3) Smartphone accessibility
4) Vehicle accessibility (ADA compliance)
5) Liability

Nearly all the agencies raised concerns over driver drug and alcohol testing requirements. There may be some confusion about whether or not transit agencies are required to follow the FTA drug and alcohol rules.

According to the FTA, public transportation operations must drug and alcohol test transit employees responsible for "sensitive functions" such as drivers (GAO-18-539).

Confusion may arise when transit agencies partner with ridehail companies. The key question for transit agencies is: when do transit agencies have to perform drug and alcohol testing for drivers that are not employed directly by the agency? According to the Federal Transit Administration, drug and alcohol testing is not required in the following circumstances:

1) A project that is funded by Public Transportation Innovation (§ 5312) research funds.

2) A project that falls under the taxicab exemption.

The *taxicab exemption* provides that drug and alcohol testing are not required when riders can “select from two or more companies that can provide the requested ride.” For example, if a public transit agency contracts with a single taxicab company in a partnership, then they must perform drug and alcohol testing because passengers cannot choose between multiple companies. When applying the taxicab exemption for ridehail companies, the same rule applies – in that, if the transit agency contracts with two or more ridehail companies and/or taxicab companies they do not need to perform drug and alcohol testing for the relevant drivers. In a similar scenario, if the transit agency contracts with a single taxicab company because they provide ADA compliant vehicles, and a single ridehail company (like Uber), then the taxicab exemption applies because there is a still a choice between two or more companies (FTA 2018).

Today, this means that transit agencies and ridehail companies can “design the service such that the taxicab exception applies or incorporate the ridesourcing company drivers into the drug and alcohol program” (Federal Transit Administration 2018). In other words, according to the FTA, transit agencies partnering with ride hailing companies do not need to conduct drug and alcohol testing so long as they provide riders with two or more options.

However, our interviews suggest that transit agencies differ in their interpretation of these policies; one participant stated that they used the taxicab exemption, while others still expressed concerns over required drug and alcohol testing regardless of the number of companies involved in the partnership or program. This is may be somewhat surprising given that transit agencies communicate regularly and share information with one another.

It is possible that information channels between the FTA and transit agencies are insufficient. In future work, we plan to interview respondents and ask them *why* the drug and alcohol rules generated concerns.

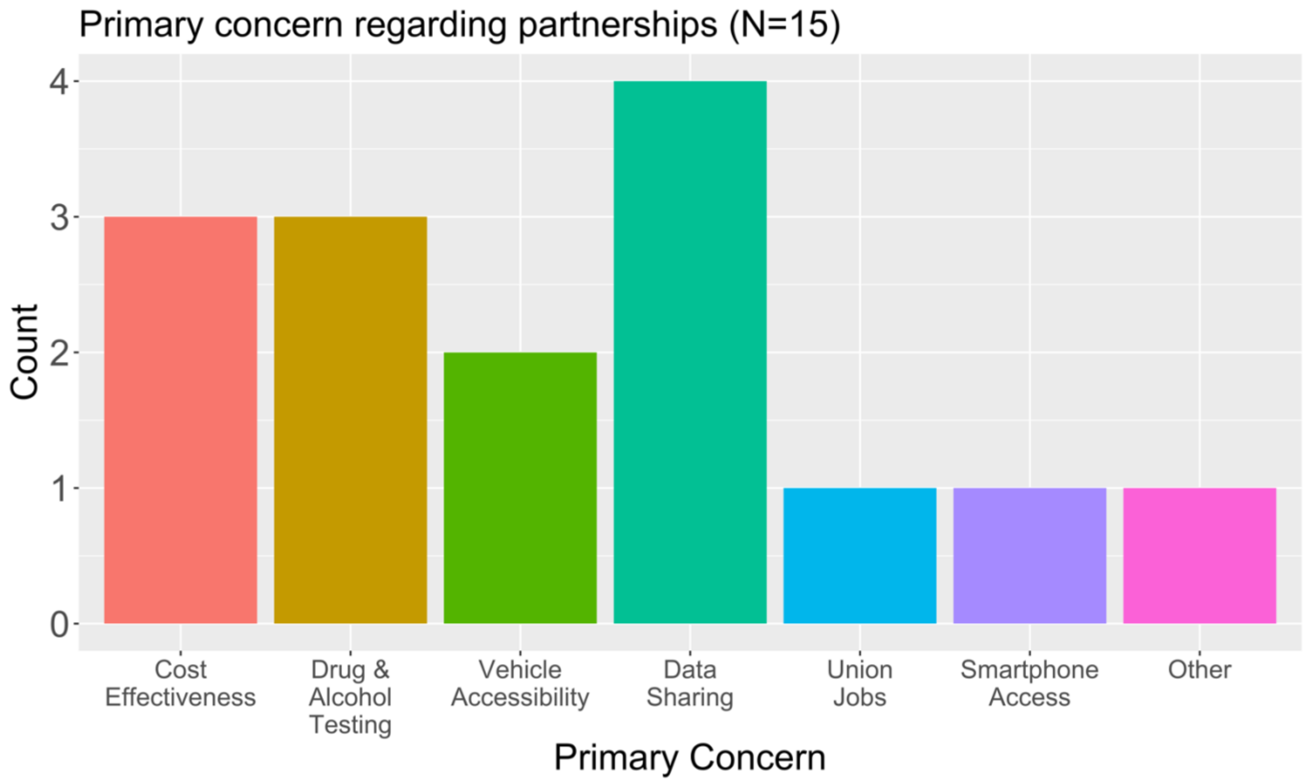


**Figure 5. Primary concern regarding partnerships**

Following our initial question related to concerns about forming partnerships with ridehail companies, we asked respondents to identify which of those was their single most important concern surrounding the possibility of forming a partnership with a ridehail company. Most participants selected data-sharing, cost effectiveness, and drug and alcohol testing as their primary concerns (see Figure 5).

Transit agencies want and need data about the ridehail services they partner with, but those companies are often reluctant to share what they regard as private proprietary information. The Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority's (PSTA) partnership with Uber serves as a good example of data-sharing challenges. The PSTA partnered with Uber and created a pilot program called "Direct Connect." According to the PSTA, Uber only provided "dollar figure rather than cost per ride" information and did not provide information about the duration, origin or the destination of each ride (Das Acevedo 2018, p. 76). The PSTA understood Uber's privacy policies and offered several proposals to mediate data-sharing concerns. However, Uber rejected all resolutions (Das Acevedo 2018, 77).

Our preliminary interviews offered a similar narrative. Transit agencies expressed frustration that while data-sharing issues were an important component of contract negotiations, it is something that transit agencies do not have a lot of leverage over. When we asked veteran partnership-transit agencies about what information gathering agencies asked them about, data-sharing came up time and again. Previous literature suggests that "circumstantial limitations, public agency shortcomings, poor information channels, and platform preferences" contribute to data-sharing issues (Das Acevedo 2018, 80).

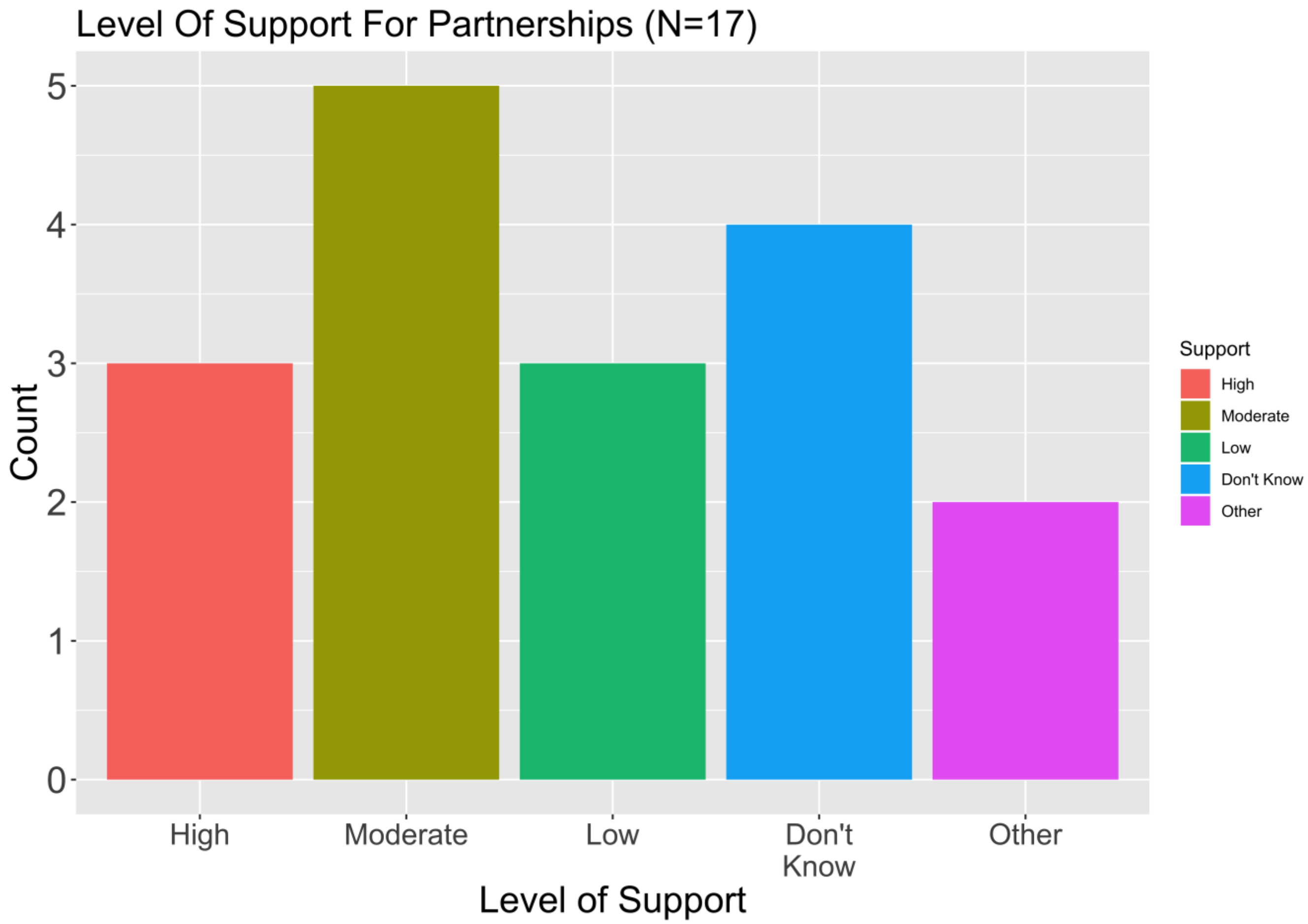


**Figure 6. Level of support for partnerships**

In Figure 6 we present responses to the question "What was the level of support within your transit agency for a partnership?" Most transit agencies without partnerships were moderately supportive of entering into a partnership. It is likely that issues surrounding regulations as well as data-sharing impede partnership formation.

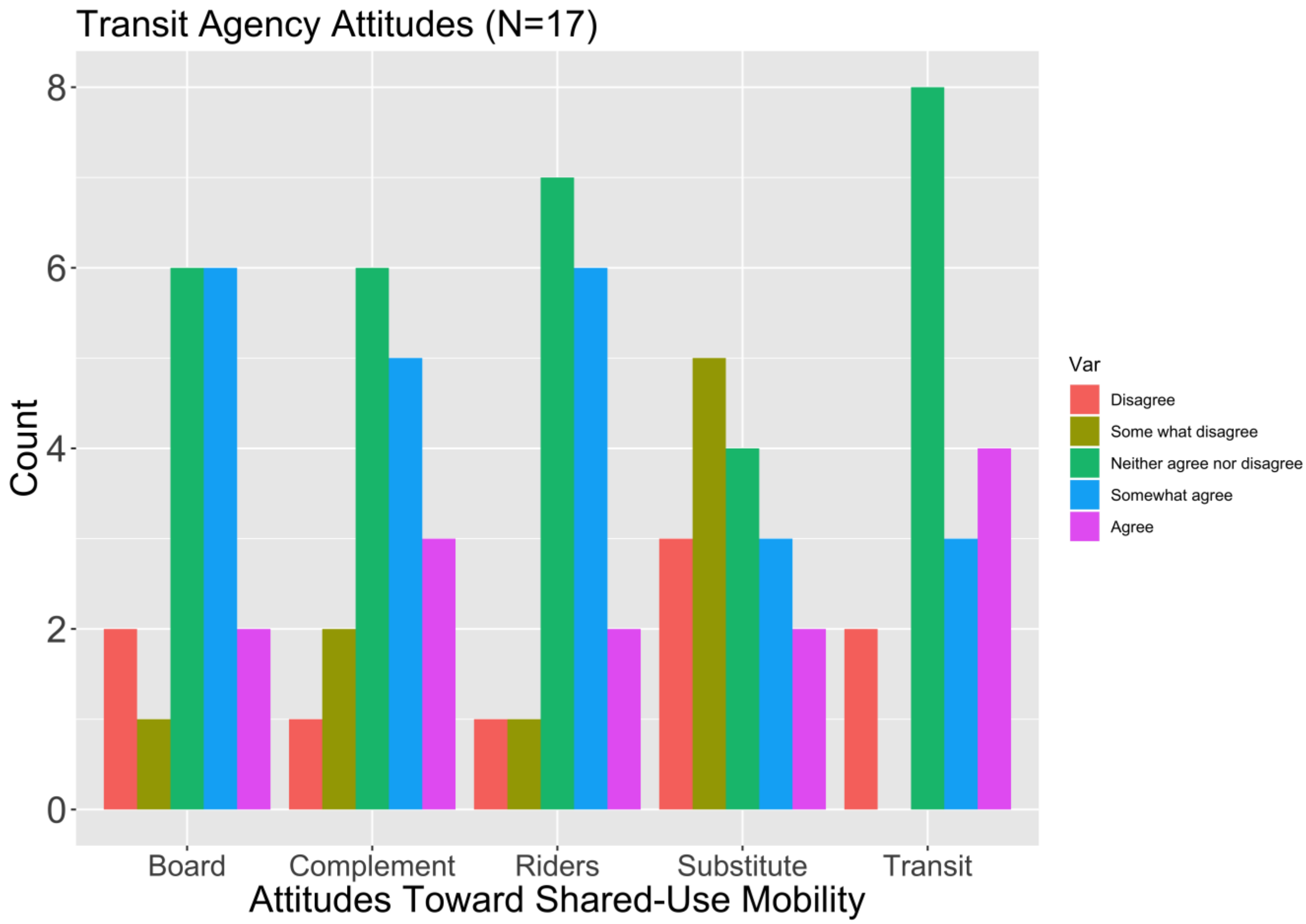


**Figure 7. Transit agency attitudes toward shared-use mobility**

Figure 7 presents information about how respondents view the attitudes toward shared-use mobility of their different stakeholders. Specifically, we asked respondents whether or not their agency, their riders, and their board held favorable attitudes toward shared use mobility companies. We were also interested in assessing if transit agencies viewed shared-use mobility companies as a complement or a substitute to transit service. Participants generally agreed that "Our **transit agency has favorable attitudes** toward shared-use mobility companies." However, participants expressed some disagreement with the statement "Our **board has favorable attitudes** toward shared-use mobility companies." These preliminary data suggest that respondents perceive differences in the attitudes of different stakeholders connected to their agency.

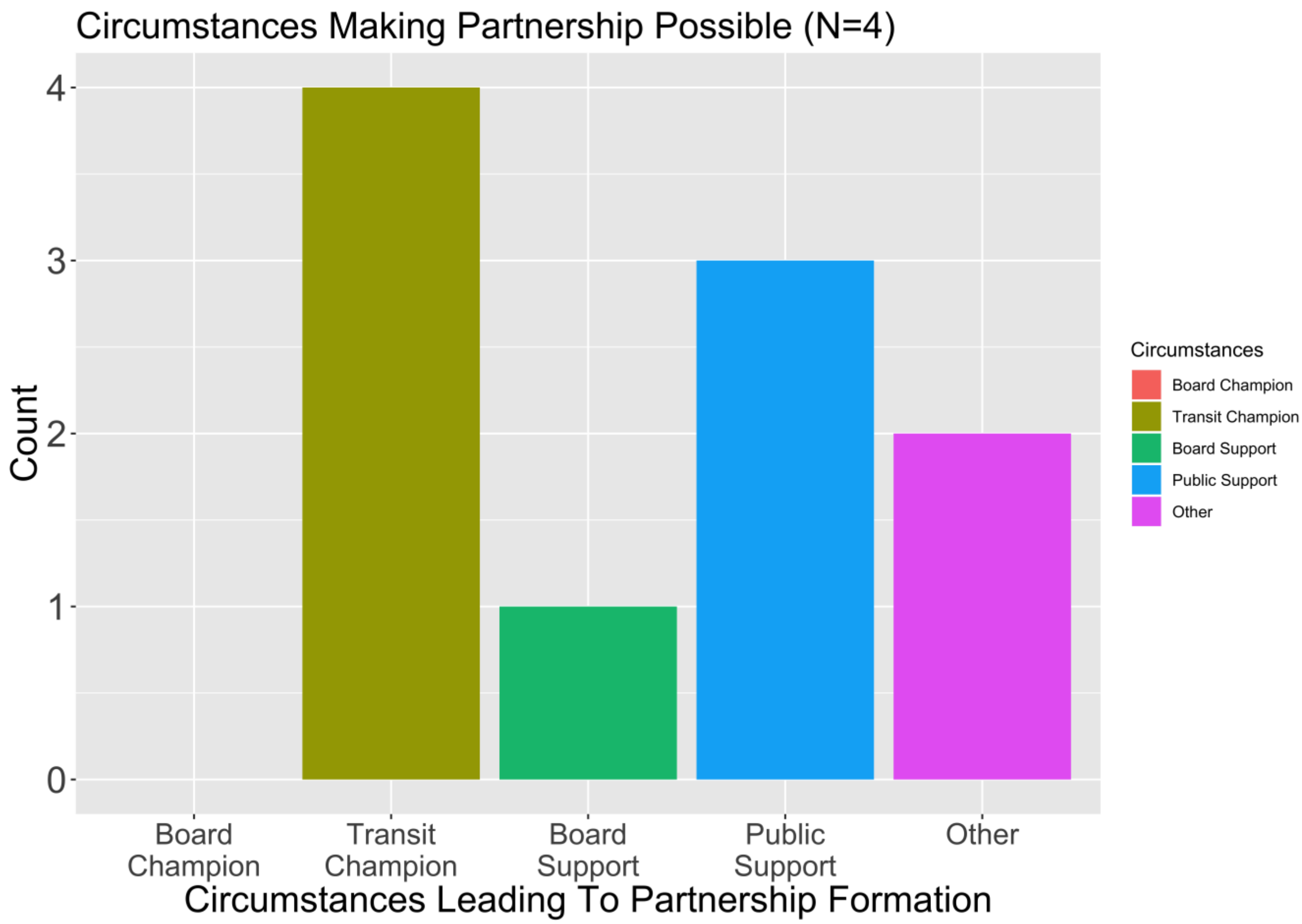


**Figure 8. Circumstances making partnership possible**

In Figure 8 we present information on the question "Circumstances Making Partnership Possible." Although the sample size here is small, our preliminary analysis supports our hypothesis that the presence of a policy entrepreneur (e.g., a "Transit Champion") may be an important factor for partnership formation.

# Discussion and Conclusions

In this report we present results of an ongoing study exploring partnerships between transit agencies and ridehail companies. We were particularly interested in the factors that influence the decisions of transit agencies whether or not to pursue such partnerships to offer programs that address some transit service challenges.

At the heart of this work lie two inter-related questions. First, are these kinds of partnerships a good thing for transit agencies, and if so, when? Second, how can we help transit agencies that may benefit from these types of partnerships do so? Noting that transit agencies are discussing this as an option to address the challenges they face, or to solve longstanding problems, how can these options become a more feasible option for more transit agencies?

Our report offers some insight into these pressing questions. First, our data indicates that transit agencies are concerned about the cost-effectiveness of these partnerships. This means that even if transit agencies have favorable attitudes towards shared-use mobility companies, they still worry partnerships may not be a good use of public resources, or may not solve their challenges.

During our preliminary interviews, multiple transit agencies emphasized this point and stated that they are still unconvinced that these partnerships resolve transit agencies' problems, or at least that are not cost-effective.

Future work should expand on our study and focus on the question of long-term funding. Even those partnerships that have had some apparent success may not have fail-safe funds to keep these partnerships, and other new models of service such as connecting with bikeshare or other on-demand services, moving.

For now, transit agencies identify a number of service challenges, and partnerships with ridehail companies likely offers some piece of the puzzle to improving public transit. We should work to find meaningful ways of making this type of option one that can be pursued by any transit agency that sees it is a viable solution to existing challenges.

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