

Transportation is an uber-problem in Ithaca, NY.  
By Lucy Calderon

Emily Lattimer, 18, sleeps soundly under the sheets of her twin XL dorm bed at Ithaca College. It's 1 a.m. If she had just rolled over and opened her eyes, she would have seen her phone illuminated with messages of panic from her roommate, Sabrina Layson.

Layson, 18, shivers as she sits on a Green Street bench and watches the last bus of the evening drive away. Her heart pounds uncontrollably when she looks at her Uber app that says "no cars available."

Layson glances around frantically and treks 20 minutes up South Hill from the Ithaca Commons to get back to her dorm, there were barely any street lights. As a freshman, she was not very familiar with the area. She takes a risk and tries to find her way back to campus via the main road.

Layson stumbles into her dorm room and wakes Lattimer. Guilty with the thought of her roommate walking uphill alone in the dark, Lattimer tells her that she would have called her an Uber. Layson knew there was nothing her roommate could have done.

"There were no Ubers for you to call," Layson sighed.

Layson's story is not uncommon in Ithaca, New York. Ithaca College students struggle daily to get back and forth to campus because of limited transportation services. Once the Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit (TCAT) buses end service, students rely on ride-hailing companies, such as Uber and Lyft. Unfortunately, students' Uber and Lyft apps often display "no cars available" when trying to access a car. As a result, students are forced to wait in unsafe, often hazardous, weather conditions for hours until one becomes available.

In other instances, such as busy Friday and Saturday evenings, the limited supply and overwhelming demand for Ubers and Lyfts result in price surges, creating yet another problem for students who cannot afford them.

In a survey of 56 Ithaca College students, almost two thirds of said that have trouble getting Ubers and Lyfts. Out of those students, 74.3% said they have been nervous they won't be able to safely get back to campus. Secure transportation is of concern to students, and more specifically to those who do not have cars and are far from home.

"I was at the mall, missed the bus and the next one wasn't for over an hour because they were running late," Maya McCullough, 18, said. "No Ubers or Lyfts in the area. I cried."

Transportation Network Companies (TNC), also known as "ride-hailing" and "ridesharing" services, are still quite new to Ithaca. Although approved by New York in [2017](#), counties with a population of 100,000 or more people have the option to "opt-out" of the services. With a

population of [102,678](#) in 2017, Tompkins County's Transportation Committee discussed the future of Ithaca's transportation services at their June 26 meeting.

Members of the community spoke in support of or against opting out of ride-sharing services. Residents thought the services would benefit the county by reducing the number of drunk drivers, providing secure transportation options, motivating cab companies to become more efficient and bringing more jobs to the area.

One of the speakers at the meeting was Associate Director of admissions at Ithaca College, Cara Nichols. Nichols named an instance where a prospective student decided not to attend the college because of the poor transportation services he experienced before he had even left the airport. The committee voted unanimously to allow TNCs to serve Tompkins County. They agreed to revisit how the services affected the county in one year.

In 2018, the Transportation Committee reviewed ride-hailing services. John Kadar, the president of the cab company Ithaca Dispatch, shared the findings of his team. Kadar accused the ride-hailing companies of foul play, and said in the [June 1](#) meeting "there is price-rigging occurring due to all the drivers in the area turning off their mobile application causing it to appear there are a limited number of drivers available which then increases the fare price."

Jennifer Tuttle, Director of Public Affairs at Lyft, said that she was not aware of that issue, and would get back to the committee. Mike Lane, a Tompkins County legislator and previous chair of the Transportation Committee, confirmed that Tuttle never provided the committee with that information. She did, however, confirm that Lyft has documented hundreds of drivers in Tompkins County, but the need remains.

"I was a 45-minute walk away from campus with no Ubers around and freezing cold weather," Marlee Pelton-Fuentes, 18, said.

One of the expected outcomes of ride-hailing services in Ithaca is more jobs for residents. Nichols noticed that most of the drivers she encounters are from neighboring cities, such as Binghamton, Elmira, Cortland and Corning, who travel to Ithaca to take advantage of a town with two colleges. Dennis Dier, 32, fits into that category, and commutes to the city five days a week to work. He said that most commuting drivers work on the weekends, so it is hard for students to find Ubers during the week.

On an Uber driver's forum, people said that it is worth it to make the trip up to Ithaca on the weekends, where it is rumored that one driver made up to \$1 thousand in one weekend. On the other hand, some drivers discourage the trek because the hilly terrain and uneven roads of Ithaca can damage their vehicles. One driver said that he did the trip once and "could smell my brakes cooking after a couple of hours."

Although there are many levels to this issue, some things are clear. Most drivers work part time, predominantly on weekends. If students want to get around during the week and struggle to access the TCAT, cab companies may be their best bet. Colleges might want to promote cab

services for weekday outings. If road conditions are of concern to drivers, the city could invest in revisions so the services can properly reach their residents. Ithaca may want to increase the frequency of TCAT busses, or extend their hours of service on weekends, in order to mitigate the for ride-hailing. Lastly, Uber and Lyft should revisit Kadar's claims to see if price-rigging is a real issue.

Either way, students in Ithaca want something to be done.

Ten days later, Emily Lattimer lays awake in her dorm bed at Ithaca College. Lattimer no longer sleeps with her phone on "do not disturb." She stares at the screen that is illuminated with texts from her roommate, Sabrina Layson, who is on a bus back to campus from New York City. Layson is set to arrive in Ithaca at 2 a.m., and worries she will have to walk up the hill again.

She eventually notices a fellow student on the bus, and they split the cost of the only available Uber in the area.

Layson got lucky. However, maybe other Ithaca College students did not get so lucky that night, and had to haul their luggage up the hill, in freezing cold weather, because Layson took the last Uber available. This story is just a snippet of the struggle for reliable transportation services for students in Ithaca. They still have a long way to go.