Credit union managers are justifiably concerned about the potential for driverless cars and rideshare services such as Uber and Lyft to significantly decrease car ownership and the demand for auto loans.

As of year-end 2017, auto loans represented 34.5% of credit unions’ outstanding loan balances, and 36.2% of the growth in loans over the past 10 years.

A look at millennials provides some clues as to what the future may hold. Between 2000 and 2015, new vehicles purchased per 100 people fell 30% among adults age 16 to 34, from five vehicles per 100 to 3.5. Many believe this trend will accelerate as self-driving cars hit the market.

It's unknown when this will occur or exactly what new vehicle ownership will look like. But some possibilities include vehicle subscriptions where people subscribe to use a vehicle a few hours a day; fleets of self-driving minivans, buses, and taxis for commuters; and renting personal vehicles to others while cars would otherwise remain idle.

While this may all sound like a far-off futuristic world, companies like Turo already facilitate personal vehicle rentals, and numerous car companies are already designing vehicles for the driverless world and experimenting with different ownership models.

For example, Waymo, the self-driving tech unit of Google, has begun public trials of self-driving minivans in Phoenix, and Uber has been testing self-driving vehicles with passengers on the streets of Pittsburgh since 2016.

There is little doubt these changes will be good for the average American consumer.

In addition to fewer accidents and casualties, Deloitte Consulting estimates the cost of personal car ownership could drop from 97 cents per mile today to less than one-third of this amount, and Intel Corp. estimates 250 million hours of consumers’ commuting time could be freed up each year.

While this may all sound like a far-off futuristic world, companies like Turo already facilitate personal vehicle rentals, and numerous car companies are already designing vehicles for the driverless world and experimenting with different ownership models.

Experts believe truly self-driving vehicles are still decades away, especially given safety concerns in the wake of tragic accidents with autonomous vehicles. The good news is that credit unions have time to adapt and innovate. But they’ll need to adjust at some point.

What can credit unions do to better innovate and prepare for the future? We recommend connecting more with members—particularly younger members—to better understand their hopes, needs, and challenges.

This could be accomplished through surveys, focus groups, or one-on-one conversations. The information gleaned could bring to light new areas of financial innovation and experimentation.

For instance, a recent Federal Reserve study on the economic well-being of U.S. households found that consumers’ biggest financial concerns were issues related to health and medical expenses, retirement, and the cost of education.

Credit unions could explore possibilities to offer innovative student loans, or consolidate medical bills.

They also could continue their strong growth in business lending, which has grown from $3 billion in outstanding loans in 1996 to $70 billion today—an annual growth rate of more than 17% for two decades.

As credit unions continue to explore new opportunities, understand members’ needs and challenges, and experiment with new products and services, they will continue to play a vital role in serving their members well into the future.

JORDAN VAN RIJN is CUNA’s senior economist. Contact him at 608-231-4286 or at jvriijn@cuna.coop.