

More taxis needed

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Calgary Herald August 24, 2009 Comments (4) Story Video (1)

Could it be the city is finally hearing the growing chorus of voices, crying "Taxi" into the lonely night?

After years of frustration hailing a cab in Calgary--and following the creation of a consumer group advocating on behalf of taxi passengers --the city's new taxi limousine advisory committee says it is listening. It will hold a public meeting Sept. 10, and has launched an online survey, asking a range of questions including: - How long on average does it take to reach a dispatcher? - Did the driver use a cell phone while driving?

Everyone who has ever waited for a cab that never showed up, or has altogether given up on the city's cab industry, should go online to: calgary.ca/taxi survey and respond. Now is the time to speak, while the livery transport bylaw is up for its two-year review. Granted, the advisory committee does include cab owners, who have typically resisted changes to the current system. The bottom line is the cab industry is broken. It fails everyone except the handful of brokers and investors who own the majority of plates.

The number of cabs in the city has pretty much stayed static since 1986, when a cap on licences froze the number of taxis to 1,311 cabs. The population has nearly doubled, but only 100 new plates have ever been issued, three years ago for handicapped-accessible vehicles.

This is bad public policy. Calgary is a business city of one million people, yet its cab industry still operates as if it were 1986 and the population was still 640,000.

Such a monopoly has artificially pumped up the value of standard taxi licences to nearly six figures, making it impossible for new drivers to own their own plates, under a system that keeps them poor, no matter how hard they work or how good or bad the service is that they deliver.

Those who argue deregulation would lead to a deterioration in quality of service fail to recognize that the cap on quotas can be lifted, while maintaining oversight of the industry, to ensure the highest safety, environmental and driving standards possible.

What's needed are higher standards, more competition and the ability for drivers to own their licence plates -- thus becoming small business operators who benefit from the pride and monetary incentive of working for one's self.

The industry fears the market will become flooded if the cap on plates is lifted, but people won't flood into a business unless they can make a profit. Competition, from a consumer's point of view, will lead to more choice, better service, cheaper fares and more

employment for drivers, as it did in New Zealand. Drivers who take pride in their work, offer reliable service, and show up as promised, will not only make a good living but should thrive, as Calgarians are hungry for adequate cab service.

The 30 per cent drop in fares some operators reported this spring might be mostly because of the recession, but it is at least partially due to a public so fed up with the unreliability of the Calgary taxi experience, it has abandoned the industry. People and businesses are finding creative ways of bypassing cabs altogether, hiring their own drivers when hosting weddings or parties, and designating a driver from within their own group.

The city's taxi regulators are listening. The travelling public should deliver an earful.

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Your Comments

deporkinheimer

August 24, 2009 - 8:00 PM

I believe that people at the taxi commission must be receiving benefits from people in the taxi industry, there is no other reasonable explanation for them forcing Calgarians to make do with the same number of taxis as 1986 - 23 years ago. To the best of my knowledge there are no other private business owners in this city that have been protected from competition in this way. I know that for the most part we live in a free enterprise city, whats up with the taxi cartel?

Thomas

August 24, 2009 - 2:33 PM

No, we don't need more taxis. We need less taxis hanging around the airport for hours looking for the big fares. Reduce the taxi parking at the airport by 70%. The drivers and taxi companies will then figure they need to service all of the city, not just the airport.

Jimmy

August 24, 2009 - 12:18 PM

In almost every taxi ride I have taken here, the driver has taken a call on his cell phone (who is calling them so frequently???). I feel that the passenger's safety should take a priority over personal calls - and I don't believe that there are business calls coming through as that's what the fare machine is for (displaying messages from dispatch). I find Calgary cabs to be quite clean (though I usually travel with a major company like CheckerYellow or Associated - no comment on smaller firms). I read in articles that a cap on licenses has driven cab licenses to levels where it is hard for newcomers to afford to buy a license. That in itself is not unique, as cab licenses in New York are extremely expensive and seldom owned by the drivers but instead by companies and investors. The difference is the sheer volume of cabs in New York ensures you can find one nearly anytime (short of extreme rush times like the stretch from 7pm-8pm when everyone is getting to restaurants and theatre). I would also suggest that a confirmation number system be put in place for pre-booked cabs, as a number of times we have been left waiting when someone showed up at the base of our condo building and took our pre-booked cab even when it had been booked by name (requiring a scramble to make it to the airport on times). The wait time has much improved over last year and 2007 (fewer calls encounter "fast busy" beeping while trying to get through to Checker), so kudos to them for at least marginally improving that issue. But the wait for an operator can still be 5+ minutes (though at least now you can connect to the 'hold' system and not be forced to redial repeatedly for 20 minutes) In summary, once in the cab I am content with the level of service of Calgary cabs relative to other cities I visit, but the number of vehicles on the street and the wait time to order are two areas that really need to be fixed. Toronto and NYC have dozens of cabs lined up at night to hail.

Bill

August 24, 2009 - 9:49 AM

Having moved here recently, I have to say that this is the worst city I have ever been in to try and get a cab, as well as being among the most expensive. Aside from very poor availability downtown, the drivers are pretty bold as well. A recent pre booked flat rate airport trip ended with the driver demanding cash (presumably to be "lost" in his pocket). Needless to say we paid with a credit card and gave no tip. It's not that he was truly hard done by, as the half hour drive cost us \$65, flat rate, well more than I would have paid anywhere in SW Ontario. There is something wrong in this city, someone besides the greedy cab companies is benefitting. There should be an RCMP probe.