

Better taxi service sought

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Proposed rules aim to improve public access, driver safety

By Kim Guttormson, Calgary Herald September 6, 2009 3:01 AM

The city is considering a number of changes to the rules governing taxis--including putting cars on the road for more hours, limiting the number of plates an individual can own and allowing digital signs to display help messages--as part of a push it believes will improve customer service and safety for drivers.

Proposed amendments to the bylaw come at a time when cab companies are reporting a drop in business of up to 40 per cent from the busy past few years, while classes to qualify new drivers are full.

And a new advocacy group is trying to gain momentum, arguing more cars on the road and changes in how the business is structured would boost service for customers.

"The public has to be able to access cabs," said Ald. Druh Farrell, who has pushed for greater involvement of consumers on the committee that oversees taxis and limo service in the city. "We need a safe, reliable, efficient system with a focus on customer service."

She says the industry hasn't been proactive enough in dealing with problems.

Jason Ronald occasionally takes a cab after a night out, but says it can be difficult hailing a taxi with waits from between five and 30 minutes.

"If you're calling for a cab late at night, you can't," he said. "I've waited an hour for someone to answer the line."

He said he would like more cabs on the road, adding that taking a taxi is expensive.

The bylaw review underway -- along with an online survey by the taxi limousine advisory committee trying to obtain public feedback --once again opens the contentious issue that is taxi regulation.

On the surface, it's a simple system. The city has issued 1,411 plates, creating that many cabs, and requires the owners to abide by rules relating to fares, the car's condition and the driver's qualifications. About 3,800 people have a city-issued licence to drive a cab in the city.

In reality, it's much more complicated.

The plates are owned by both individual drivers and brokers, who both hire people to drive for them and charge a fee to independent owners to use dispatch and other services.

About 126 plates belong to people who view them as investments and own more than one. Marc Halat, the city's manager of transport livery services, which registers the transactions, said the price to transfer a plate has gone as high as \$150,000. He would also like to see the system change to allow one person to own only one plate.

As the city boomed over the past few years, customers began to complain about the time they wait to get through to a dispatcher and then how long it takes for a taxi to arrive --if one does.

Drivers point out that in a business where time literally is money, customers often order multiple cabs, refuse to pay or cancel their credit card payments. Safety concerns--or worries they'll be cleaning vomit out of their back seats--dissuade drivers from picking up intoxicated passengers when the bars close.

This spring, there were eight attacks on cabbies, who were assaulted during robberies.

The city is in the middle, tasked with balancing the needs and safety of the public with the needs and safety of drivers. Add into the mix that it's a system built on previous systems over decades, as well as drivers and brokers fighting to protect their livelihoods, and there never seems to be an easy answer.

It's also an area city council doesn't seem eager to wade into.

"Voters for Taxis is still trying to convince aldermen it's something they should look at," says Karen Cameron, a consultant with the advocacy group and a former manager of the city's livery transport services.

Voters for Taxis is trying to get the concerns of consumers included in the process and would like to see more cabs when people want one.

The group has been calling for an open system--which would mean not restricting the number of plates as is done now -- as the simplest solution to what they acknowledge is a much more complex problem.

"I think abuses in an open system are less than a closed system," Cameron said.

Ultimately, what Cameron believes would work best would be to have brokers hold the plates and then hire drivers, which she argues would ensure them putting enough cars on the road to meet demand. As employees, the drivers would have to work when told.

Right now, a driver who owns his or her own plate is basically self-employed. Even if they drive for a broker, they pay a weekly fee, so the broker has no real interest in how often they're on the road.

However, Cameron also acknowledges the transition between how taxis operate now and her scenario would be difficult.

Raj Gill, who manages Delta Cabs, a driver-owned broker, said an open system would be disastrous.

Having driven a cab since the early 1970s, when anyone could operate as a taxi, Gill believes customers would not like an open system. The number of plates was capped in 1986, although the city added another 100 a couple of years ago, to increase number of handicap-accessible vehicles.

The condition of the cars, both in terms of mechanics and cleanliness, drivers fighting for fares and no one making any money, which Gill says he witnessed under an open system, wouldn't help anyone, he says.

"An open system won't give you people like me," he said. "When business is good, they'll work. When business is bad, they'll leave the industry.

"I've invested in my own small business."

He views driving a cab as his career, one that has provided for his family and, with the ability to transfer his plate, will assist with his retirement.

Halat said there is a need to get more cars on the road during times of shortage, but dumping plates on the market isn't the best option.

"Managing the current system is the answer," he said. "On average, do we have enough taxis? I believe we do. It's how we manage."

Changes that should increase the amount of time cars spend on the road, and make driving safer, should encourage more cabs to hit the streets, he believes.

Amendments he'd like council to consider include setting a minimum number of days a car has to be on the road, rather than tying those to the driver.

As well, a new program called My Safe Ride Home, which basically is a prepaid taxi card, is being worked on, which would alleviate the drivers' concern that they'll be paid.

And Halat has approved new tops for the cabs that can carry digital advertising--but also display "help, call police" if a panic button is hit.

In a parallel move, the taxi limousine advisory committee--comprising industry and citizen members--has launched a survey at www.calgary.ca/taxisurvey, and will hold a public meeting Thursday at the downtown library between 4 p. m. and 7 p. m.

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