

All hail Voters for Taxis

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The perfect model for the taxi industry evades even the best cities in the world, but that shouldn't stop Calgary regulators from seeking a better functioning system.

Calgary's model lacks incentive for drivers or brokers to provide better service, which, in turn, hurts customers, who are perhaps the biggest losers of the current system.

Anyone who has tried hanging up their keys in favour of grabbing a cab knows too well the challenges of getting a taxi during rush hour, closing time or whenever it rains or snows.

Callers can't get through the line to dispatch, dispatch can't get drivers to accept calls to certain areas of town, and drivers are reticent about working late at night.

The taxi industry definitely needs rerouting. Regrettably, the outcome of the current two-year review of the livery transport bylaw is more likely to lead to a dead-end, at least in terms of meaningful change.

"We've been told the review is to tweak, not overhaul the system," Karen Cameron, cofounder of Voters for Taxis, told the Herald editorial board this week.

To her credit, she has almost single-handedly planted the seeds of reform by, ironically, quitting her job as the city taxi regulator and starting up Voters for Taxis, a public advocacy organization representing the rights of the travelling public.

Cameron, a former lobbyist for the transportation industry, saw first-hand the lack of public engagement in the process.

Two years ago, numerous measures brought forward to amend the livery transport bylaw would have benefited customers, such as a passenger bill of rights and minimum standards of service, including banning drivers from talking on cellphones while driving.

These things got gutted from the final bylaw. Cameron believes it happened because there was no one in the room advocating on behalf of the travelling public.

That was the catalyst that finally led to a voice for customers of the taxi industry. The city launched its own survey asking people what they think of the service, only after Voters for Taxis did their own poll showing people are so fed up, they're bypassing the industry altogether. And with good reason.

Prior to the closure of the system in 1986, taxi plate licences cost about \$110. The latest one transferred for \$140,000.

Since 1986, despite the enormous growth of Calgary, only 100 new accessible cabs have been added, for a total of 1,411 taxis for a city of more than one million people.

The current system pays brokers whether or not they provide good service.

Drivers bear much of the risk, paying exorbitant "stand rent" to brokers each week, regardless of the price of gas or the dips and peaks in the economy.

Cameron believes brokerages need to be empowered to manage their fleets according to market demand. For that to happen, they would have to be able to force drivers to work certain hours and in certain areas.

Drivers would have to be classified as employees, instead of the current designation of self-employment.

But, if drivers are paid benefits, a salary and given appropriate safety protection, such as a camera in the car or a glass shield, and hired as employees, brokers could then insist they work shifts.

Brokers could schedule enough cabs on the streets for peak periods, such as closing time.

That's just one of endless possibilities of what a more functioning model could look like.

First and foremost, a debate among all the players needs to occur.

The industry lobby is strong, and the powerful owners have represented themselves at the table.

As a result, hailing a cab in Calgary is never a sure thing. That's why fed up customers should all hail Voters for Taxis.

Finally, a group is speaking up for the paying customer and starting to drive the agenda for much needed change.

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