

Calgarians endorse taxi industry

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By Len Bellingham, For The Calgary Herald November 16, 2009 3:09 AM

There has been much rhetoric about a perceived shortage of taxis, how difficult it is to get a cab and much misinformation about who owns licence plates and who stands to benefit.

According to a scientific taxi survey, most Calgarians feel positive about the taxi industry and their ability to get a taxi during peak periods, after midnight, during bad weather and during special holidays. Calgarians gave the industry a positive or satisfactory rating between 82 to 85 per cent. The poll was done by well-known pollster Bruce Cameron.

That indicates that except for unusual or unforeseen circumstances, there is no shortage of taxi cabs in Calgary.

- On any given night in Calgary between 11 p.m. and 3 a.m. there are up to 30 per cent more cars on the road as there is demand.

- On average, wait times on telephone calls at peak times on Friday and Saturday are between zero to two minutes.

It's unfortunate that the public and the media has been given a picture of a non-functioning taxi industry unable to meet the demands of people late at night. The individuals who make those statements have not been made accountable.

Available transportation for revellers leaving bars late night is a universal problem. It has nothing to do with mismanagement. There is not a shortage of taxis, but a problem of access for taxis and safety for the drivers.

Drivers are concerned for their safety, drunken bar patrons often get sick in the back of taxis, there is no taxi parking areas available at entertainment districts, passengers run away without paying fares. Some drivers experience that four times in one night.

Up to 600 no trips are reported every night. That is when a taxi has been called and no passenger is there. What happened? The passenger called two or three different companies and took the first cab.

We are talking with the city about designated taxi gathering areas in the entertainment districts and perhaps queues at major event facilities as possible solutions to the access issue.

The accusation that company owners do not want more plates on the road to limit competition is false.

The bylaw limits the number of licences through a controlled entry system and that protects the stability in the industry which creates a safe, reliable and efficient service for both drivers and consumers.

Individual drivers hold about half of the 1,411 taxi plates issued by the city. The companies hold the other half. The number of taxis was set in 1986 when the closed entry system was adopted. At that time there were too many taxis. Just now the city is catching up to the number of plates issued.

Calgary has one taxi for every 750 people. The average in North America is one taxi for every 900 people.

Drivers are independent contractors who are the beneficial owners of their own cars. They keep 100 per cent of their meter fares.

Taxi companies charge a fee to provide the drivers with services like Insurance, computerized dispatching and GPS, advertising, telephones, corporate accounts, accounting and financial card processing and safety devices for the drivers, including cameras.

Not all companies charge the same service fee.

The taxi industry understands there is some need for improvement and is working hand in hand with the city to find them, but it does not need rerouting as suggested by the Calgary Herald.

A self-proclaimed consumer advocate group says consumers are not represented in taxi matters. That's simply not true. There are three members of the public specifically appointed to sit on the Taxi Limousine Advisory Committee (TLAC) of city council.

TLAC held a public forum to get feedback. It was widely advertised and only a handful of people turned out to voice their concerns, including the disabled community which does have legitimate needs.

That meeting simply reinforces the scientific taxi survey that shows despite negative coverage of the industry in recent media stories, Calgarians rated responsiveness positively the last time they used a taxi.

The response to get a taxi once it was ordered was rated as good or very good by 71 per cent of Calgarians and adequately by 15 per cent. Only 11 per cent rated it as poor.

The time it took to place the order was rated positively by 67 per cent, satisfactory by 19 per cent and poor by only 11 per cent.

Ease of getting a taxi was rated as good or very good by 65 per cent, satisfactory by 20 per cent and poor by only 14 per cent.

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