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It's the Radios!

by Abe Mittleman

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Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and his recently appointed Taxi and Limousine Commission (TLC) head David Yassky, have an old idea with a new spin. They want to legalize the widespread and illegal practice of livery cars picking up street hails in the outer boroughs and parts of Manhattan.

This plan will require livery cars to be equipped with taxi meters, G.P.S. tracking, and credit card machines. Not only will this put livery cars in direct competition with medallion taxis, which have the exclusive rights to the street hail business, it is simply legalizing an illegal act without solving any problems. Is this fair?

Bloomberg and Yassky say that the needs of taxi riders in the outer boroughs aren't being met by medallion taxis. This cannot be denied. However, both Bloomberg and Yassky have failed to consider the root of this problem. Is the cause simply that the outer boroughs are undesirable for medallion taxi drivers or is it the illegal activity of the livery cars that is robbing legitimate medallion taxis of the opportunity to pick up these outer borough passengers?

Livery vehicles were created in the mid 1980's to handle radio calls exclusively, so medallion taxis could meet the rising demand for street hail services in New York City. The new rules enacted by the TLC at that time prohibited medallion taxis from radio calls while prohibiting livery cars from picking up street hails.

On the surface, everyone was a winner, but under the surface, this arrangement was flawed and we are seeing the results today. While the number of medallion taxis was capped, the number of livery vehicles was not. As a result, the supply of livery cars grew more quickly than the demand for service. This led to livery cars illegally accepting street hails, a right reserved solely for medallion taxis, to make up the difference.

To make matters worse, the utter lack of enforcement by the TLC to prevent illegal street hails by livery cars sent medallion taxis packing, forcing them out of the outer boroughs and into the streets of Manhattan, where the street hail demand is high.

In the mayor's plan, livery vehicles are given an unfair advantage - they are available for radio work and free to pick up street hails. This uneven playing field means that medallion taxis that currently provide service in the outer boroughs will be overwhelmed by the sharp increase in livery cars accepting street hails. This will lessen the incentive for medallion taxis to make outer borough trips and steals their ability to earn a living.

If the mayor and Yassky want to increase service in the outer boroughs, this is not the way to do it. We should be creating incentives for medallion taxis to go to the outer boroughs, not discouraging them.

Livery cars should not be allowed to proliferate without a cap on their numbers. Medallion taxis should have the right to do both radio calls in the outer boroughs, as well as the street hails they are entitled to. This will encourage medallion taxis to be in the outer boroughs and available for both. The livery cars will still be busy with most of the radio work they already do now. This should leave no gaps in service. All the customers' needs will be satisfied. Everyone will benefit.

Abe Mittleman was editor of the taxi industry publication Mini-Press, as well as a veteran taxi driver.

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