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An Ocean in the Boroughs

By **ABE MITTLEMAN** | April 30, 2007

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MAYOR BLOOMBERG DOESN'T LIKE THE IDEA AND NEITHER does the chairman of the Taxi and Limousine Commission, Matthew Daus. But Council Member John Liu of Queens and several other council members favor changing the double-standard taxi system that has been in place for too long in the City of New York.

Mr. Liu wants the TLC to set up two taxi stands in all five boroughs similar to the very successful one that has been in place in Flushing for the past four years.

Referring to medallion taxis working the proposed taxi stands in the outer boroughs, Mr. Daus said, "When there's an ocean of water to drink in Manhattan, why would they go for a puddle in the outer reaches of the city?"

According to Mr. Daus, the current system of livery taxis works well enough. Mr. Liu points out that it only works because thousands of people a day are hailing gypsy taxis illegally.

As is the case on many subjects in the city, New Yorkers have varied ideas. Suggestions posted on the Internet range from creating special medallions for the boroughs only to getting rid of medallions altogether and letting the number of taxis be uncontrolled. The latter was the case before 1937, when the Haas Act froze the number of licenses because there were far too many taxis on the streets.

But one thing that is common with all is just about everyone wants to have a metered medallion taxi available anytime and anywhere should they decide to step out and hail one. No one wants to wait for a car service if they are standing out on the street.

A look at the city's taxi history may provide a solution to the taxi service problem.

Prior to 1937 just about anyone who wanted to be in the taxi business could get a license and buy a car to be a taxi. In 1937, the city's Board of Aldermen passed a bill introduced by one of its members, Lew Haas, that limited the number of licenses to those that already existed. At the time, the number of taxis satisfied the needs of the public in all five boroughs and there also was concern to protect driver earnings. This action established the medallion system as we know it today.

As time went on, the need for taxi service far exceeded the number of available medallion taxis. But still medallion taxis worked in all five boroughs. Unlicensed gypsy taxis began to take over in neighborhoods that the medallions could not serve.

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By the 1980s, with only medallion taxis working legally for street hails in all five boroughs and the demand for taxis growing rapidly in all areas, Mayor Koch tried to add 1,800 medallions. Facing legal opposition from the taxi industry that feared additional medallions would create more competition, the Taxi and Limousine Commission decided to create more radio cars. The TLC said that a medallion was not needed to do radio calls and told the gypsies that if they joined a radio group, they could operate legally.

All radios were removed from medallion taxis, which received the "exclusive right" to all the street hails in the city. Thereafter, the medallion taxis had the street hails, and the radio taxis had the radio work.

With no cap set on the number of radio taxis, far more such cars than what was needed to do radio calls were created. In order to survive, they had no choice other than to steal the street hail business in the outer boroughs. This led the medallion taxis to work mainly in Manhattan and at the airports. The public had no choice other than to use what was available.

It's time to admit that mistakes were made. Ed Koch never got the 1,800 medallions that he wanted. But between Mayor Giuliani and Mayor Bloomberg, 1,300 medallions were issued. Business in Manhattan and at the airports has been good enough to keep them all busy.

The question remains how do we satisfy people in the boroughs who want medallion service?

One answer is first to figure out how many taxis are actually needed to do radio work and limit the number of radio taxis to that. Then more medallions should be issued to satisfy the need for street hails in the boroughs. The radio taxis should then understand that their street hail days are over. There should be heavy penalties to enforce this. Medallion taxis should also have radios for those who desire. Let the public decide what kind of taxi they want to pull up to their doors.

Yes, Matthew Daus is right. Medallion taxis won't go to a puddle when there is an ocean elsewhere. What he doesn't realize is that there is an ocean in the outer boroughs. It's just been polluted by cars illegally swimming in it. It's time to clean it up.

Mr. Mittleman is a veteran New York City taxi driver and editor of Mini-Press, a publication of the New York City taxi industry.

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