

No Fare for Consumers by Larry Fisher

Over ten years ago, the Taxi and Limousine Commission made a monumental decision, although it looked like a trivial matter. Allegedly, in the interest of aesthetics, Chairman David Yassky decided to redesign the exterior of the iconic yellow taxi fleet in New York City. No longer would the outside of the cab say “Taxi,” but instead, the bold and black “T” would represent the word taxi. That a consumer might get confused by the lack of the word taxi on the vehicle was a minor point.

Simultaneously, Yassky also removed the rate of fare decals indicating the mileage and time charges a consumer could expect from a taxi ride. This was a particularly suspicious maneuver since only a short time before, there were several media sensationalized stories regarding drivers overcharging customers. Why would the TLC, as representative of the city, believe it was in the best interest of the consumer to hide the potential fare to the rider?

Councilman James Vacca, then City Council Transportation Committee Chairman, opposed this idea. “I think passengers have a right to know before they get in a cab what the fare would be,” Vacca said. TLC officials testified at a hearing his committee held on these issues. They said, “the printed rates are confusing and ugly and that TV monitors inside taxis will soon show riders the rates in real time during their rides.” So, the TV monitors, which later became the most annoying aspect of taxi rides, basically replaced the rate of fare decals.

Ashwini Chhabra, a TLC Deputy Commissioner who later left the TLC to work for the app companies, said at the time, “Since the final cost of a trip is really a formula that depends on traffic, per-mile fares can be misleading to passengers.” So, Chhabra’s solution to disclosing the rate of fare was to hide it. Makes no sense, unless, of course, the intent was to blur the lines of what is a taxicab and what is not. Then it makes perfect sense.

A few years later, Abe Mittleman, the owner of a medallion, and the publisher of NYC TAXINEWS.COM, petitioned the city in an attempt to reinstate the decals on the exterior of the taxi cabs indicating the rate of fare for taxis. The TLC’s answer to Mittleman’s petition then, in 2018, was no. This time, the purported excuse was that the TLC was examining the potentiality of dynamic or flexible pricing and showing fixed rates on the taxis would be counter to that initiative. Initiative? What initiative? Is there any evidence that this was ever a potential reality? Talk about an idea ripe for abuse. Ever hear of exorbitant Uber rides during high demand periods or emergencies?

So, to sum up, let’s go back to basics. Let’s put the the T word back on the vehicles. We spell it TAXI. And furthermore, let’s put the metered rate of fare back on the rear doors of our iconic vehicles because the long history of yellow medallion taxis is pro-consumer. The bad apples get caught doing bad things and are dealt with by law enforcement. The consumer deserves to know what they’re paying for. Ahead of time. No surprises at the end, like a hospital stay. You ever order an item in the restaurant that has no price tag? I always ask how much. I don’t like being abused, and neither should taxi passengers.