

Online Athens

## Taxi debate driving on

Posted: Sunday, February 29, 2004

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Your Cab cab driver Carly Shockley takes a call from her dispatcher while waiting by The Arch at the University of Georgia downtown for a fare Friday night.

Jeff Blake/Staff

Athens-Clarke commissioners will decide Tuesday which is the biggest risk to public safety: putting loosely regulated taxis on the street to help clear out downtown around 2 a.m. or setting stringent requirements that some independent drivers just can't meet.

After months of meetings between taxi drivers, tourism leaders and police officers, two versions of new cab regulations will go before commissioners Tuesday.

One version requires all cab companies to operate 24 hours a day, a rule that's meant to keep unprofessional, part-time "gypsy" cabs off the streets, but that also might drive some smaller companies out of business.

Athens-Clarke Police Chief Jack Lumpkin presented a second version late last week, conceding that independent cab owners should play a role in meeting Athens' cab needs.

"Our big challenge, we think, is getting enough cars on the road," said Art Jackson, chairman of Athens Downtown Development Authority.

While people ride buses or walk into downtown during the day, after dark those modes of transportation either are not available, in the case of buses, or not advisable, in the case of walking.

"We try to send what can be 10,000 people home with just taxis," Jackson said.

While the men and women who lure tourists to Athens also want safe cabs, they were willing to support the more restrictive ordinance - the one that would keep independent drivers off the roads - since it promised to give some visitors a better experience in Athens.

"In the tourism industry, you want to make sure that you have safe, dependable, reputable taxi service," said Convention and Visitors Bureau Director Chuck Jones.

The CVB has gotten a handful of complaints from visitors over the years about the condition of local cabs and drivers' reliability when they are called to a fare, Jones said.

The local taxi law has called for 24-hour service for years, requiring a dispatcher at the taxi company office to log each trip a driver makes, whether it came from telephone call for cab service or from a passenger who asked for a ride from the sidewalk.

But taxi company owners had fallen into a habit of leasing their names to independent drivers who might or might not properly use the dispatcher service.

Last year, several cab companies came together and agreed that they wouldn't do that anymore, since it presented safety concerns - there might not be a dispatcher recording where a cabbie was working - and it cut into the companies' profits during the busy hour when downtown bars shut down.

Athens has 58 taxicabs, 50 vans and eight station wagons providing taxi service, according to the police department.

But the handful of companies that own those cars and vans range in size from London Taxi's one car to Your Cab's 44 vehicles.

Neither cab company owner had lent their company's name to gypsy cabs in the past, they say, and both voluntarily agree not to in the future. But the owners - London Taxi's Brian Smith and Your Cab's Jack Benton - disagree about whether the 24-hour rule is necessary.

"It's ill-advised," Benton said of Lumpkin's decision to recommend an ordinance that allows some independent drivers. "The ordinance, as it has been written and amended, is to regulate the taxi industry because you have citizens along in a car with somebody. You need to have some confidence that that person has some qualifications."

Under the ordinance proposed by the police chief, taxi companies would operate 24 hours a day, but independent drivers could contract with taxi companies to lease their logo and dispatching service. That owner-driver could remain relatively independent, setting his own hours as he sees fit.

But, he would have to carry the same insurance as the cab company, and the cab company would be responsible for him obeying the law.

Allowing independent drivers compromises riders' safety because company owners can't watch over an independent contractor as they would their own employee, Benton said. The system also penalizes companies that provide unprofitable daytime service by allowing part-time cabs to compete with them in the 2 a.m., downtown market.

"The ordinance basically regulates one time and deregulates others," Benton said. "Competition is fine, but unfair competition isn't."

But most cities allow cab drivers that are more or less independent from the company name posted on the side of their car, according to Alfred LaGasse, the executive vice president of the Taxicab, Limousine and Paratransit Association, the Maryland-based non-profit trade association for that industry. Throughout the country, drivers lease cars from a company owner, pay a set amount and then hit the streets to earn as much as they can during the shift.

Typically very large cities also will allow owner-drivers - people who own their own car but pay a company for its name and dispatch services.

"I would argue that you get better organized service through fleets. That's just my personal opinion - with 26 years of studying the industry," LaGasse said.

Those fleets can be made up of independent contractors, but individual owner-operators just can't get around town fast enough to make them practical, he said.

As far as peak hour concerns, LaGasse said there's no way to avoid them.

"Everywhere in the world, the industry has the peak-hour problem," he said. "If you have enough cabs to serve peak demand, your cab drivers are starving."

Commissioners will consider the ordinance and likely vote at their meeting scheduled for 7 p.m. Tuesday at City Hall.

Published in the Athens Banner-Herald on Sunday, February 29, 2004.

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