

Vehicle for Hire Licensing Board (Wednesday March 29, 2023)

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Mark Barlow called the meeting to order at

Present: Mark Barlow, Youness Jamil, Gene Bergman, Paul Hines, Karen Paul, Kyle Clauss, Sarah Montgomery, Tenzin Chokden

1. Agenda

Motion to approve made by Karen Paul. Seconded by Paul Hines. Passed unanimously.

2. Introductions

Mark Barlow introduced himself as a ward/district City Councilor, chair of the TEUC committee, and by default, chair of the Joint Committee.

Paul Hines introduced himself as a new member of the Vehicle for Hire committee.

Youness Jamil introduced himself as a new member of the Vehicle for Hire committee.

Karen Paul introduced herself as Ward 6 City Councilor and a member of this committee.

Kyle Clauss introduced himself as Assistant City Attorney who staff the board and committee.

Sarah Montgomery introduced herself as Assistant City Clerk.

Tenzin Chokden introduced himself as Associate City Clerk and staff person for Taxi licensing.

3. Previous Minutes

Motion to approve made by Karen Paul. Seconded by Paul Hines. Passed unanimously.

4. Public Forum

No member present for the public forum.

5. Communications

5.01 Taxi Complaint - Tim King

Deferred the discussion to later in the meeting - Next Steps.

6. Hearings

Mark Barlow went over ground rules on hearings.

- Complainant will go first and then Vehicle for Hire company or representative will go next.
- Complainant can respond after.
- Committee will ask any questions and deliberate at the end of the meeting and a decision will be made and notice on decision will be sent by mail.

6.01 Hearing - Adria Taxi

Complainant not present for the hearing.

Kyle Clauss swore in Saud Bajramovic who is speaking behalf of driver, who is his father.

Saud Bajramovic described that the complainant took a ride from Adria Taxi at night and noticed the driver was driving slowly, stopped in the middle of the road, and asked too many questions on direction. She didn't feel safe because the driver was driving slowly at 1:00am.

Youness Jamil made a comment that from his business perspective if a customer does not feel safe riding a cab then it is not good for the business. They should do something about it, either not operate if they are tired or just call it a day if they feel like they are not able to operate safely.

Paul Hines asked: What can be done to improve the sense of safety for customers?

Saud Bajramovic replied: He might not work late at night anymore. The driver has glasses but he doesn't use them.

Youness Jamil added not only he is concerned about customers' safety, he also cares about driver's safety because he is a friend.

Saud Bajramovic replied that his father didn't have any accidents.

Mark Barlow asked Gene Bergman if he has any questions on this hearing.

Gene Bergman replied: No.

Karen Paul asked: Is the driver present in this hearing?

Saud Bajramovic replied: The driver is his father and he is present.

Karen Paul corrected Saud Bajramovic that according to the complaint form, the incident happened at 10:00pm not 1:00am.

Karen Paul asked Saud: Do you agree with the complainant's concern about the cognition of the driver?

Saud Bajramovic replied: It is because of the language barrier that he asks a lot of questions. The driver's first language is not English.

Karen Paul asked: Do most drivers use GPS?

Saud Bajramovic: Yes. It would be better for the driver to use GPS so he doesn't ask so many questions.

Karen Paul noted that customers feel better when they are not asked too many questions on direction and especially when they are coming from a long flight.

Youness Jamil gave advice that the driver should really stop driving at night.

Mark Barlow told the driver that they will deliberate after the meeting and make a decision on this hearing and let them know. He closed the hearing.

6.02 Romp Taxi Service LLC-Stephen Romprey

Kyle Clauss swore in Stephen Alan Romprey and Florence McCloud.

Florence McCloud explained that she arrived at Burlington airport back in January and she saw Winooski Romp & Ride was first in the taxi queue. She asked the driver if he could take her to Farrell St in South Burlington and the driver agreed. She got in the cab and it was about a 5-10 minute ride and he charged her \$29 when she arrived at the destination. She didn't see any rate posted anywhere in the cab. She was upset about the charge and only give him \$20 and took her suitcase. She thought \$20 was fair. Then the driver got out of the taxi screaming and called her "Bitch" and asked for her name. She was really upset about being overcharged for her ride and his behavior towards her when she only gave him \$20.

Stephen Romprey testified that he had all his paper work right on the glove box and the meter was not running because he was charging her a flat rate. he calculated the gas price and distance and asked her for \$29. He admitted that the charge was high; he felt like \$25 would have been fair charge but wanted to see what she would do. He admitted he called her "Bitch" and that he called for her name but he didn't scream at her.

Youness Jamil asked: Why didn't you use the meter? The rule is you must use the meter when you are picking up someone from the airport.

Stephen Romprey replied: I just didn't use it. I'm sorry. I thought it was okay to have flat rate. He said that she could've asked him for the estimate but that he forgot to give her the estimate.

Paul Hines asked: Why are you not using their meter? Is it because the meter is not enough?

Stephen Romprey replied: He doesn't make enough from using the meter because he has to wait in queue for 4-5 hours before he finds a customer. He doesn't agree with charging someone under \$10 because it is not enough. He is charging people flat rates for short distances because it's only way he can make money but on a long ride, he will use his meter.

Gene Bergman asked: Did you give her an estimate before she got in the car?

Stephen Romprey replied: I did not give her the estimate and she didn't ask.

Karen Paul asked: If he goes by the meter rate, which is \$2.50/mile and for 4.4 miles plus \$6.50 would be around \$17.50 for the trip and that's how much she should pay. There is big difference between \$17.50 and \$29.

Stephen Romprey replied that is because he uses flat rate for short distance trip, therefore he charged her \$5/Mile for 4.4miles. He added that some cab drivers will add an extra \$4.

Gene Bergman asked if he is running a taxi cab with roof light.

Stephen Romprey replied: Yes, I'm all legal and also subcontract with Winooski Taxi. I paid for \$900 for the airport queue sticker.

Youness Jamil argued that the sticker cost should have been \$500.

Mark Barlow told the driver that this will be go under deliberation after the meeting and he closed the hearing.

7. Next Steps

7.01 Ordinance updates, etc.

Mark Barlow wants to go back to the discussion they had in the last meeting about rate structure and practices - some of which have been improvised to some extent, and are not necessarily in accordance with ordinance. The board talked about having a larger discussion around what they might do to address some of these things. Mark Barlow proposed some of the ideas that he came up with in preparing for this meeting: to review and update any ordinances related to taxi and vehicle for hire, update the fare structure and clarify and communicate rules with the taxi and vehicle for hire operators; Maybe survey current licensees to see what they think is working; Discuss the role of how Uber and Lyft fit into the equation; Look at what other airports are doing as well as if there's any best practice.

Youness Jamil suggested the first thing that every driver is complaining about right now is the lack of updating the meter rates. Even though the cost of living has increased significantly, the meter rate has stayed the same. Drivers' number one priority is to update the meter because it doesn't reflect either increased gas price or the cost of living. The drivers are refusing to use the meter because they are not making enough money if they use meter. Another problem is they don't have anyone in the state who can calibrate the meters. There used to be one company in Burlington but the owner moved to Florida. If they cannot use the meter then he suggested we go back to the old system when they charge by zone.

Paul Hines agrees with Youness Jamil stating that he also noticed that almost nobody is using meters at the airport. He used to pay to \$22 for his fair but lately its been \$30-\$60 and he agrees that it may be that they are not making enough money by using meters. He would like to see a new electronic system like Uber and Lyft - reliable, customers can schedule a ride, safe, and most importantly customers know how much they can expect to pay.

Gene Bergman asked if there is anyone at the airport who would communicate with drivers about the rules on the site.

Youness Jamil replied right now there is nobody. Sheila used to work at the airport and she would make sure that the drivers were following the rules and update them on what they can do and cannot.

Gene Bergman added: we have problems with the meters, not the least of which is they are not calibrated right and we don't have somebody here to calibrate. We also have not adjusted or had a process for triggering adjustments in the meter prices when the cost of living goes up, which we used to have. In addition, he noted that there were always zoned within Burlington, but he doesn't believe we ever had a zone from the airport to Burlington.

Youness Jamil also mentioned that right now there is no communication between drivers and the airport. Nobody is updating drivers about the ordinance and the drivers do whatever they want. The airport is the face of Burlington and Vermont and it doesn't look good when the tourists come to the airport experiencing bad taxi service. This is not good for tourism.

Gene Bergman asked: how much revenue is the city itself generating from the licensing of cabs? If we have an administrative structure to handle things, then you've got to be able to to pay for it. If we are collecting, what are we using that money for?

Sarah Montgomery replied she doesn't know the number but she will follow up on that.

Youness Jamil mentioned there are other drivers who are on a long waiting list for the airport queue and are ready to work but they can't. There are 47 stickers and some of the drivers are not using them at all and holding the space.

Karen Paul commented the transparency is important and whatever we can to do to increase transparency is important. Most of the complaints that we've heard are similar in nature and most of them are just lack of communication or clear understanding of what people are going to be charged before they get in the cab.

Mark Barlow asked Saud Bajramovic if he has thoughts.

Saud Bajramovic commented that the meter rates need to be updated because nobody is using them except himself and few other drivers that he knows.

Mark Barlow asked Nick Longo from the airport to make comments on this discussion.

Nick Long stated what they would like to do is propose some changes at the airport. Some of the the simpler improvements can be related to the physical infrastructure and signage at the airport. Updates that would allow passengers to easily understand what taxi cabs are required to have posted inside their vehicle. They are working on adding additional signage in the taxi area at the airport. At the airport commission meeting that is scheduled for next week, they will look at increasing the number of queue permits allowed to be sold at the airport: 47 permits are currently sold. He is not sure that this would solve the problem with late night flights, but it might add to the the permits that are available to do be there. Also, among the proposed amendments or changes is adding bigger infrastructure - adding geofencing and gate system into the airport, adding overflow lots for passengers, but also for the taxi lane. They have called dozens of airports to see how they facilitate administer taxis. From an administrative standpoint, he feels they could do much better with adding technology into the airport. Geofencing is very difficult and expensive, but some these needed systems could absolutely be accomplished. He acknowledged that this doesn't alleviate some of the concerns that he has heard with the quality inconsistency of what's being offered, meter and non-meter cash price gouging.

Paul Hines asked: How does it help us with gated system?

Nick Long replied: Maybe from the driver perspective, it might not help, but from an administration and an equitable standpoint, it would help because Lyft, Uber, and taxi drivers would all be using the same system.

Youness Jamil asked: Would we still have to pay for the queue sticker annually?

Nick Longo replied: it would be similar but these are preliminary ideas and are not yet being implemented. These are possibilities to clean up the administrative works.

Youness Jamil asked: Who will in charge of this? Is it the Airport or the City?

Nick Longo replied: The airport would be in charge as far as permit systems go.

Youness Jamil asked if the Airport has own geotag system like Uber and Lyft?

Nick Longo replied: No, we do not have a geotag system. The geotag is from their system. They report their pick up and drop offs on a monthly basis using their system.

Youness Jamil asked: How do you we know that their system is correct or honest?

Nick Longo replied: He is not insinuating that, but that's exactly the equitable standpoint that using one system for everybody that is going through the same gate would solve. Accounting for a tag on the inside the vehicle going through that system and allowing the same transaction to be recorded.

Gene Bergman asked: How many licenses are there at the airport currently?

Nick Longo replied: Right now 47.

Gene Bergman asked: Is it 24 hour license? Is it the same price? is there incentive for drivers to decide that it's worth it to go to the airport after midnight? The relationship between the commission and this board in terms of administrative changes - how do we coordinate ourselves?

Nick Longo replied: That's right and it's an annual price. The commission's authority is really just tied to the number of queuing permits allowed.

Gene Bergman asked: Would the airport commission be involved to some degree in the process, if this board were to come up with something innovative related to pricing and to try to incentivize drivers at different times of the night by lowering fees?

Nick Longo replied that they do have a companion rule and it's his understanding that the quantity of queue permits sold and the cost at what they are sold is the purview of the airport commission.

Youness Jamil agreed with Gene Bergman on incentive for driver's to work at night.

Mark Barlow commented that Geotag is great way to keep track of usage of queue permits and could help inform the airport on who should retain a permit or not.

Nick Longo agreed, but stated that the Geotag is very expensive.

Paul Hines agreed that we need to update the system whether it's using a phone app or something else. Paul asked if they could come up with questions about how small cities operate their taxis and forward to Nick to find answers from other small airports.

Nick Longo agreed.

Mark Barlow suggested we wait for the response from Nick Longo before updating the meter rates.

8. Deliberative Session

8.01 The board deliberated on the two hearings privately.

9. Adjournment:

Mark Barlow adjourned the vehicle for hire board at 7:56pm.

