

Politics Trumps Legal Business

I am the Executive Director of the Committee for Taxi Safety as well as the Editor-In-Chief of this monthly "newspaper" the Taxi Insider. As such, I have been involved in discussions and negotiations with our regulators on important issues and for many years have never taken it upon myself to discuss such meetings in this newspaper. However, I am going to report to you as I see it, an overview of how the taxi industry in New York City ended up on the short end of a deal that may very well change the yellow taxi industry forever. What I believe you need to know is how we really got to this point. It is not a politically pretty story, but it will leave you in the know, at least from my point of view and also leave you with some sense of "who did what."

By this time, I know that all of you readers have heard that the New York State legislature passed a bill that would allow for up to 30,000 FHV's to attain a three year permit which would allow them to pick up street hails in upper Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island.

We first heard of the Mayor's plan, offering the same taxi service to all Boroughs that Manhattan has in his State of the City address. A number of industry associations including the Committee for Taxi Safety, the Greater New York Taxi Association, LOMTO, the Taxicab Service Association and the The Metropolitan Taxicab Board of Trade, all volunteered to make the Mayor's dream a reality. The Committee for Taxi Safety and every other association listed above discussed multiple plans with the city of New York and the Taxi & Limousine Commission in an honest effort to both provide the best safe and reliable outer Borough taxi service while also protecting the yellow medallion system. That is a fact.

The City Council engaged in these discussions with us in a sincere attempt to learn exactly how the exclusive right to street hails affects our industry financially and from the points of view of drivers, owner drivers, long term drivers, leasing agents and fleets. Discussions regarding the financial aspects affecting the taxi industry is something for some reason, that the city chose not to engage in.

Most of the plans and proposals we had discussed would have truly provided the service in the outer Boroughs, the kind of result that the Mayor was hoping to attain. Every time there was an objection or an obstacle "at the table," we all worked to successfully to fix it with the City Council.

The City Council was taking the necessary time to digest ALL the facts in order to understand our industry and the consequences any bill would have. There is no doubt in my mind that we were working in good-faith with the City Council for a reasonable solution.

We kept getting closer to a plan that would satisfy all segments of the New York City transportation industry, and most importantly as stated, provide the public with equally safe and reliable taxi service.

But, instead of continuing those serious discussions and negotiations to find that perfect solution, a backroom deal in Albany, without a single hearing I might add, set the stage for those involved to try and "pull a fast-one" on Father's Day weekend. This Albany process conveniently cut out the City Council from having a "home rule" hearing. If this new plan is so good, why hide it from the public? Where was the opportunity for the people to be heard in this process?

Now we have the Mayor's original plan in which the livery bases and drivers that operated in violation of their TLC approved licenses were rewarded with a permit for street hails, while the yellow industry that was negotiating in good faith to preserve that street hail right, was totally disregarded, and that readers is the worst of all worlds.

Additionally, it should be known that out of New York City's approximate 250 bill agenda up in the state capital, the only bill that passed was drafted over Father's Day weekend and then passed in less than a week! How does this scenario even rank as an accomplishment?

This was not a "business as usual" back-room deal in Albany because this bill is a bad plan for all of New York in that it will not provide the service that it claims. It is likely that livery drivers who violated the law before this bill will continue to violate the terms of this permit in the same way illegal street hails have been going on the last forty years.

A lot of folks are using this simple example; How can this bill allow a valued yellow medallion taxi to work on 96th street picking up street hails and also allow for an livery vehicle the same street hail right on 97th Street? Remember, the overwhelming majority of medallions are owned by immigrants and first generation Americans who have dedicated their lives to be small business owners in the yellow taxi industry.

On that note, this bill does not even obligate the city to have any enforcement goals, nor does it access the need for outer Borough street hails before issuing permits or selling new medallions.

It is also unfortunate that the TLC and the city does not seem to "get it." The city will not be able to get close to the funds they initially anticipated in an auction of 1500 medallions because they focused on the wrong thing, giving the livery industry a virtually free hold on street hails.

The bill does not even take into account the impact on the environment that 1500 new medallions would have in addition to all these livery cars that will now be cruising the outer Boroughs. No, we have no idea even what the city thinks on these issues because they avoided any questions by engaging in an Albany back-room deal with once again, no questions asked! I keep repeating this because it bothers me. Apparently there is a lot the city does not understand, but again, at least the city council was attempting to understand our industry in continued discussions.

After seventy five years of evolution and working with our regulators in a legal manner, bringing many millions of dollars into the New York City, all we really got was this back room deal over Father's day weekend. Happy Father's Day!

The fact is that those working in violation of their licenses should NOT trump the legal yellow and livery workers.