

Taxi drivers appeal to City: No special rules for Uber

By Don McIntosh
Associate Editor

Kedir Wako never imagined he'd one day share a stage with Broadway Cab general manager Raye Miles at a Pioneer Courthouse Square political rally. Wako was a leading member of a group of Broadway Cab drivers who protested exploitive conditions, formed a driver self-help association, and ultimately broke away to form a new union-affiliated cab co-op. Now Wako is president of that co-op, Union Cab. But on Jan. 13, Wako put aside bygones for a common cause: Getting the City of Portland to insist that companies like Uber play by the same rules as the taxi companies they compete with.

Portland, like many other cities, regulates taxi rates, caps the number of vehicles, and requires driver background checks, vehicle inspections and proof of insurance, among other rules. But on Dec. 5, Uber launched its app-based ride service in Portland in violation of those regulations. Two weeks later, Portland Mayor Charlie Hales announced the City would propose a new set of taxi rules by April 9 that would allow companies like Uber to operate legally. And Uber announced it



Portland taxi drivers rallied Jan. 13 at Pioneer Courthouse Square. Cab companies want the City of Portland to make ride-sharing companies like Uber play by the same rules as they do.

would suspend its service until then.

The City has a long-established volunteer citizen review board known as the Private For-Hire Transportation Board of Review. The board includes an elected taxi driver representative, a taxi industry representative, a disability advocate, an airport representative, a tourism official, and others. But instead of turning to that board, which has decades of collective experience with taxi rules, Hales and City Commissioner Steve Novick appointed a brand-new Private For-Hire Transportation Innovation Task Force, with no representative from taxi drivers or compa-

nies, and no real familiarity with the industry.

That didn't sit well with taxi companies or drivers. To make sure their voice is heard in the new rule-making process, six Portland taxi companies formed a new group, the Transportation Fairness Alliance. Its launch party was the attention-grabbing rally, with parked cabs covering Pioneer Courthouse Square.

"We welcome competition, as long as everyone plays by the same rules," Radio Cab superintendent Noah Ernst told rally participants. Despite the current cap on the number of City permits (460), Ernst said the industry is quite competitive. Existing

companies and would-be competitors have applied for over 100 additional permits, only to encounter a protracted and perplexing decision process by city bureaucrats.

"We are as frustrated as anybody when you can't get a cab at peak hours," Ernst said.

The day after the rally, members of the new task force met for the first time for an orientation led by City officials and taxi regulators. The 12-member task force includes representatives from the Portland Business Alliance, the Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association, and a software and technology trade association, as well as a night club owner, an insurance consultant, and disability, environ-

mental and immigrants rights advocates.

"We don't usually in the context of American capitalism regulate rates and limit entry into markets," Novick, who is in charge of the Bureau of Transportation, told the group. So, Novick said, the task force should consider whether or not the City should continue to do those things.

The task force heard a presentation from taxi companies Feb. 4, and will hear from taxi drivers Feb. 10, from "transportation network companies" like Uber on Feb. 19, and from the public on Feb. 25. In March, they'll work to come up with regulations, which would be presented to City Council April 9.

City of Portland to consider \$15 an hour for contract workers

The idea of a \$15-an-hour wage floor is continuing to gain momentum. On Feb. 18, Portland City Council will hold a hearing about updating the City's 20-year-old living wage ordinance, which sets minimum wage and benefit levels for several groups of contract employees: janitors and security guards

at city buildings, attendants at city-owned parking lots, and some workers at city-owned Providence Park.

Under the City's current Fair Wage Policy, the workers must be paid at least \$10.38 an hour plus \$1.92 an hour for benefits. The group 15 Now PDX is calling for that minimum to rise to \$15 an hour, and benefits to \$2 an hour — effective Jan. 1, 2016. Commissioner Dan Saltzman is in favor of that proposal, which is also backed by Laborers Local 483 and by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 49, which represents janitors and security guards. "We want to see it as a springboard, challenging private sector owners to step up," said Local 49 organizing director Maggie Long.

City Council will take public feedback on the issue Feb. 18 at 2 p.m. at City Hall, and could vote on an increase then or at a later date.

If a \$15 minimum passes, the City would become the third Portland-area government body to set that standard for at least some workers, following Home Forward (the local public housing agency) and Multnomah County. It would also mean sizable raises for over 100 workers, including 62 janitors employed by Portland Habilitation Center and 30 security guards employed by G4S. The janitors make \$12 to \$13.80 under their union contract, and the security guards make \$12 to \$14.50 under theirs.

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