

RIDE HAILING UBER ALLES

Uber and Lyft poised to return to Eugene, despite some concerns

All signs point toward the return of Uber and Lyft to the streets of Eugene. Back at the Monday, April 23, Eugene City Council meeting, councilors voted 7-1 in favor of passing an ordinance to update the city's public passenger vehicle code in order to make operating in Eugene more attractive for transportation network companies — primarily Uber and Lyft.

Regarding the return of these companies to Eugene, "The outcry from residents has been huge," Eugene City Council member Emily Semple said prior to the vote at the meeting. "At night people want to go out drinking; we need to have a way for them to get home safely."

Semple also said, "Taxis haven't been supplying the service that's needed."

Eugene's tech industry was a key player in pushing for the return of ride hailing services.

The Technology Association of Oregon (TAO) in the Southern Willamette Valley posted on its Facebook page: "Thank you to all the TAO members that spoke out in support over the last 150 days. And shout out to the Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce & Springfield Chamber of Commerce for your partnership in advocating to expand transportation options in our community."

The one councilor to vote against the ordinance, Claire Syrett, has concerns.

"I don't trust them," Syrett says of Uber. She points to the Uber's controversial track record, laden with lawsuits and scandals, as reason to believe that the company will not follow the rules set forth by the city of Eugene.

One small window into Uber's Oregon record is the 10 consumer complaints against Uber that were submitted to the Oregon Department of Justice (DOJ). *Eugene Weekly* obtained them via a public records request. Anyone can complain to the DOJ about a company and not all complaints are substantiated.

Some consumer complaints about Uber submitted to the DOJ — one laced with expletives such as "I'll see you in fucking Court, you pikers!!!" — gripe about Uber's surge pricing, something that has also made national headlines, such as when a Chicago woman was charged \$925 for a ride that normally goes for \$117.

Surge pricing happens when demand exceeds the supply of Uber cars, such as on New Year's Eve or even during local crises, resulting in a price potentially several times higher than the standard fare. Uber, through its surge-pricing feature, has long been accused of price gouging, while its drivers have at times been accused of conspiring to affect surge pricing. This is echoed in the DOJ complaints.

Richard Hardenstein's DOJ complaint against Uber focuses on fees rather than pricing. According to the complaint, Hardenstein and his wife rode Amtrak from Kelso, Washington, to Portland on March 17, where they hailed an Uber. They got more than they bargained for, the complaint says, when they discovered that Hardenstein had been assessed a \$150 cleaning fee. Their Uber driver asserted that the couple was responsible for green vomit in the car's interior. Hardenstein protested to Uber, who he says then sent him photos of green vomit in an unusual way.

"The attachment Uber sent was similar to somebody pasting photos in a document then making a screenshot of that document," Hardenstein explains.

Hardenstein contends that because Uber sent the photos of the vomit in this manner he was unable to examine the photos' metadata.

Metadata is information stored within some digital photos that allow for the exact time and location of a photo to be deduced. Without access to the original photos to check for metadata, theoretically the photos of green vomit could be from any time or place — although Hardenstein was unable to provide a copy of the pictures sent by Uber, saying that he had deleted them.

After receiving the photos, Hardenstein escalated. "I get online and see who I can complain to, and I end up submitting three to four complaints," Hardenstein says.

In addition to his DOJ complaint, Hardenstein sent a complaint to the Washington State Attorney General's Office which, according to an email provided by Hardenstein, informed him on April 23 that Uber had reversed the \$150 cleaning fee and also refunded the cost of the ride that prompted the complaint.

"We offer an informal complaint resolution service to Washington state residents," says Brionna Aho, communications director for the Washington Office of the Attorney General. She adds that in the event that a business does not respond or offer an adjustment, "We cannot compel [the business] to do so."

Hardenstein says that he is "not a big time Uber user, and I've not had any significant problems with Uber before then." He adds that he previously had issues with Lyft.

Lacking video evidence, the incident between Hardenstein and Uber came down to the driver's word versus Hardenstein's. Uber cannot comment on individual complaints, according to regional spokesperson Nathan Hambley, who notes that Uber drivers are permitted to install video surveillance equipment in accordance with local laws.

Another similar DOJ complaint from 2015 could have benefited from the existence of video evidence. In Portland, a rider was accused of urinating inside of an Uber car and then assessed a \$200 cleaning fee. From the records it's unclear whether a refund was ever offered, and the complainant could not be reached.

A ride-hailing news aggregator, whosdrivingyou.org, notes newsworthy and negative incidents involving Uber and Lyft listed chronologically, dating back to 2014. The website indicates that there have been 366 "alleged sexual assaults and harassment incidents by Uber and Lyft drivers," and also claims that worldwide there have been 49 "deaths attributed to Uber and Lyft drivers."

A prominent complaint on this website is that neither Uber nor Lyft drivers are subjected to fingerprinting or background checks conducted by police departments. Under the framework adopted by the City Council there will not be fingerprinting. Eugene police will conduct background checks, but only after a license to operate has already been issued to a ride-hailing app driver.

If everything goes as planned, ride-hailing apps should be in use again in Eugene by early summer, according to city of Eugene communication analyst Lindsay Selser. She also says that before any of this happens, the city's administrative rules must be changed. The public is allowed a 15-day period for comment on changes.

Hambley says Uber is now "onboarding" drivers in anticipation of Uber's return to Eugene.

He declines to estimate how many Uber drivers might soon be hitting the streets of Eugene, but points to Bend for reference. "We launched in Bend last year and there are now hundreds of active drivers there," Hambley says.