

CABBIES ARE PEOPLE, TOO

What happens when Uber and Lyft take off again in Eugene?

Catching a cab is serious business. If you need to call a taxi and it takes forever and a day to arrive, or doesn't arrive at all, then your best-laid plans can go awry.

Unfortunately, the local taxi companies have not been supplying the service that's needed, according to public testimony from Eugene City Council members. This has left the door open for ride-hailing apps (read Uber and Lyft) to return to the Emerald City, and also Springfield — which is serviced by Eugene's taxi fleet due to a memorandum of understanding between the cities.

Many locals are clamoring for Uber and Lyft. After the recent 7-1 vote by the Eugene City Council to amend the city's taxi-related rules and make operating in the area more attractive to ride-hailing app companies, a copy of the new rules was posted June 14 on the city of Eugene's website. This initiated a 14-day public comment period, after which comments will be considered before fully implementing a new rule set. "Staff must prepare a response to the comments. Depending on the number of comments and whether or not changes are made to the proposed rules, the process may take a week or more. Once the city manager signs, the Administrative Rules take immediate effect," says city of Eugene communications analyst Lindsay Selser.

Uber and Lyft have both taken the opportunity to respond jointly and directly to Eugene City Manager Jon Ruiz. In a June 20 letter provided to *EW* by Uber, Uber and Lyft state that "Unfortunately, Eugene's proposed rules are not in alignment with Medford's or with those of the other aforementioned cities, and therefore cannot facilitate the launch of rideshare in Eugene," with the aforementioned cities being Corvallis, Bend, Redmond, Salem and Medford.

This means that, unless the proposed rules change, Eugene and Springfield residents will have to wait for Uber and Lyft. One point that the rules proposal made clear was that the city of Eugene was not going to budge when it comes to Eugene Police Department conducting a background check on applicants. Eugene will also look to continue the requirement that the applicant apply in person. In contrast, Bend only stipulates that the company or a "qualified third party" conduct a background checks. Bend also



does not require an applicant to apply in person.

This development could give breathing room for the 486 licensed cabbies operating 124 taxis in the area whose livelihoods are seemingly being threatened by hi-tech boogeymen. They're competing with a relatively new service whose drivers offer riders amenities such as snacks, charging cables and more — not to mention riders being able to see the vehicle's location and ETA — things that before the advent of ride-hailing apps would be largely unheard of in a traditional taxi.

One indicator of the extremely stiff competition provided by ride-hailing app companies is the current value, or lack thereof, of a New York City taxi medallion. *The New York Post* reported June 9 that the medallions, which authorize taxis to operate in NYC, once valued at over \$1 million, now go for as low as \$160,000 due to a "wave" of ride-hailing apps hitting the market.

This stiff competition Uber and Lyft bring to the table has brought about reactions from local cabbies that range anywhere from seemingly nonchalant to the fear of one day seeing their taxi jobs ultimately replaced by computers — although autonomous vehicles have recently come under the microscope like never before due to a pedestrian who was hit and killed by an autonomous Uber car in Arizona last march.

"I'm not really too concerned," says Eugene Hybrid Taxi driver Shawn Ellis while parked in a lot near the Amtrak station. "We have a pretty good customer base. We have regular customers who ride with us everyday."

Ellis reckons that business among students might drop 20 to 30 percent at first, but will likely return once they see the difference in service he and the other old-school cabbies provide. Ellis contends that those who should really be concerned are less dynamic companies whose business model largely calls for its drivers to wait around at the airport for riders.

"We're not Uber," Ellis says, when asked about free rider amenities — although he qualifies his statement by adding that he often picks roses from his yard for his riders and that he is "probably the only cabbie in town that does that." Ellis also says that he can likely help someone charge their phone, and that some drivers carry water, but that's about it.

A nervous-looking Oregon Taxi driver, who pulled into the Amtrak station parking lot to use the bathroom, tells *EW* that he is afraid of Uber and Lyft putting cabbies out of business. He laments that one day machines will likely be doing his job. "How would you feel?" he shoots back rhetorically.

Also likely to struggle with the competition from ride-hailing companies is Budget Taxi, whose manager, Denise Guelld, says has no plans to build an app — though Guelld points out that they do have a website, which, as it turns out, only allows prospective riders to fill out a form and wait for a response. Guelld echoes Ellis' thoughts about tech savvy students possibly using their service less. "We hope our faithful followers will continue to ride," Guelld says. "We have been out there since 1982, day and night. Whether it's busy or slow we are covering the streets of Eugene and Springfield." ■

JON PINCUS

After two years at Washington University in St. Louis, studying 20th Century cultural history, Jon Pincus visited Eugene in 1969, just in time for the first Oregon Country Fair. He returned in 1970 for a year of study at the University of Oregon, plus volunteer work at Fair. "I frequented the Odyssey Coffee House," he says, "where Bill and Cindy Wooten were creating opportunities for community organizations like Growers' Market and White Bird Clinic." Following his graduation from WU in 1973, Pincus moved to Eugene, where he enrolled in a UO architecture master's program, continued to work at Fair, and got involved in many other community activities. "I had a mixed-media radio show one evening a week on university station KWAX," he notes, "covering social justice issues, art, poetry and related music." As vice chairman of the Westside Neighborhood

Quality Project, he became aware of WOW Hall, the art deco style Woodmen of the World Lodge Hall, built in 1932, just west of downtown, that was rented out to local performing arts groups by the few remaining members of the lodge. When the elderly Woodmen decided to sell the hall, Pincus took a leading role in creating the nonprofit Community Center for the Performing Arts and organizing the 24-hour/5-day WOWATHON that raised \$10,000 for a down payment in 1975. He served as manager of the hall for most of the 1980s. "I left to continue my work as a design consultant, focused on historical preservation," he says. In 1996, he succeeded in having the WOW Hall listed on the National Register of Historic Places. As a Country Fair elder, retired from the governing board, Pincus still puts in lots of volunteer hours with the Fair site crew.



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BY PAUL NEEVEL