

Chicago Tribune

EDITORIAL: **Open the airports to Uber**



Uber says more than 2 million rides in and around Chicago are arranged every month through its app. (Phil Velasquez, Chicago Tribune)

Uber at the airport? It's about time

Mayor Rahm Emanuel is ready to take down the roadblocks that keep Uber, Lyft and other ride-share companies from picking up passengers at Chicago's airports.

That's good news for customers who want to bypass that long taxi line at O'Hare, and for the freelance drivers who are eager to pick them up. It's more bad news for cabdrivers, who have spent two years watching ride shares chip away at what used to be their exclusive market.

But the city can't keep Uber and the others out of the airports forever, and it shouldn't try. Consumers want the ride-share option. It's no secret that some of them have already devised clever workarounds to get an airport pickup. It's time for Chicago to make it legal.

Uber says more than 80,000 customers opened its app looking for a ride from O'Hare or Midway airports in the first two weeks of September. But they couldn't get one, because only licensed taxis are allowed to make airport pickups.

That would change under a plan meant to raise almost \$50 million for the city.

The proposal includes a \$5 charge for each ride-share pickup or drop-off at the airports or McCormick Place, also currently a taxi-only zone. A 30-cent city fee on all rides would increase to 50 cents, and would apply to taxis for the first time, too. There's also a 15 percent fare hike for taxis, the first in a decade except for a \$1 per ride surcharge approved in 2008 because of spiking fuel cost.

A local spokeswoman says the taxi industry relies on airport traffic for roughly 20 percent of its earnings, and the fare hike won't make up the difference once ride shares start cutting into that business.

But the city can't continue to lock Uber and its peers out of the airports. Chicagoans have embraced ride-sharing, which allows them to summon a car with their smartphones, view the profiles of drivers before choosing one and pay via an online account. The cost of a ride varies with demand, so it can be higher or lower than a taxi's fixed rate. Customers who are willing to pay more will have shorter waits during peak hours.

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All that competition has forced taxis to up their game. Most of them have their own apps now, for example. Knowing that customers have a choice gives all drivers — taxis and ride shares — an incentive to be prompt and courteous, to keep their cars clean and their cellphone conversations to a minimum.

But the taxis say the city's regulatory structure makes it impossible for them to compete fairly. The rules that govern taxis are more costly and onerous than the ones that apply to ride shares, they say, though both provide essentially the same service.

Taxi drivers are required to have a chauffeur's license, which means they have to undergo training, drug testing, a physical exam and criminal background and credit checks. They pay a \$600 annual fee and a \$78 monthly ground transportation fee. They have to have a city medallion, which in recent years sold for \$300,000 or more because the supply is strictly limited.

That investment is worth less with all those ride-share drivers working the streets. The companies that dispatch ride shares don't need medallions; they pay the city \$10,000 a year, no matter how many drivers they sign up. Uber says it now has about 20,000. The screening process for those drivers is less rigorous than for taxi drivers, as are insurance and vehicle inspection requirements.

Ride shares set their own rates, which can increase tenfold during peak or "surge" periods. Taxi fares are controlled by the city.

All of this gives the ride shares an unfair advantage, the taxis said in a federal lawsuit filed last year. Last month, U.S. District Judge Sharon Johnson Coleman said they had a point. She noted that the city imposes "substantially heavier burdens on taxis" and said the distinctions the city draws to justify different levels of oversight "appear utterly arbitrary." She denied the city's request to dismiss the suit.

Chicago isn't going to put the ride shares back in the garage. The demand for their service is strong, especially among young people for whom life is one long series of transactions on a smartphone. But there's a demand for taxis, too. Some people are still more comfortable with fixed fares, paid with cash or credit card instead of a cellphone. Some people would rather climb into a Yellow Cab than a freelancer's personal car.

Some people might want a taxi today and a ride share tomorrow.

Choice is a good thing. Chicago should promote and preserve it.

How? Not by letting the air out of Uber's tires. The answer isn't more regulation, it's less. The city needs to find ways to ease up on the taxis so they can compete without unfair restrictions. A level road will be good for taxis and ride shares — and their customers.

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