

## **The Portland Tribune**

### **New Era Promised for People Needing Wheelchair Lifts**

*By Steve Law*

*March 29, 2018*

Portland is creating a special dispatch center for people needing a ride with a wheelchair-accessible vehicle, and providing subsidies for providers to offset some of the extra costs.

Portland residents using wheelchairs have complained for years about slow, second-class service when they hire a driver to get to medical appointments or other places. Now, more than two years after the city began collecting a 50-cent surcharge on all Uber, Lyft and taxi rides, the city will devote some of the stockpiled proceeds — as originally envisioned — to improve services for wheelchair-using customers.

By June or July, the Portland Bureau of Transportation hopes to open a central dispatch center for people needing rides in wheelchair-accessible vehicles, and provide a \$15-per-ride subsidy to offset the higher costs of transporting those customers, said Dave Benson, the bureau's parking services group manager and chief regulator for ride services and taxis.

City leaders hope a specialized dispatch center and subsidies will provide speedier service and encourage more providers to operate wheelchair-accessible vehicles, which require special lifts and can cost \$50,000 or more.

"As a person who has a disability and will utilize the service, I'm super-excited about the dispatch center being up and running," said Nickole Cheron, disability equity policy coordinator in the Portland Office of Equity and Human Rights.

She was part of the selection committee that chose two nonprofits, Ride Connection and 211, to operate the dispatch center. The city expects to provide \$600,000 the first year for operating costs, Benson said.

#### **Service still below par**

Wait times for people in wheelchairs have improved since the city deregulated its taxi industry in 2016 to allow Uber and Lyft to enter — and eventually dominate — the local market. But people in wheelchairs still wait longer for rides than other customers, sometimes a lot longer.

"We're better than we were," Benson said. "We're not where we should be."

Before Uber and Lyft entered the market and convinced the city to rewrite its private for-hire transportation code to their advantage in December 2015, Portland required taxi companies to assure that 10 to 20 percent of their fleets were fitted with wheelchair lifts.

Though taxi companies and individual drivers invested heavily to meet that requirement, it was scrapped under the new code that took effect in January 2016. In its place was a new "performance standard" that called for people in wheelchairs to be picked up within a half-hour after they called for a ride.

Subsequent audits conducted by the Portland Bureau of Transportation have shown that people in wheelchairs are waiting an average of 29 minutes for their driver to show up, said bureau spokesman Dylan Rivera. That means a good number of passengers wait longer, especially during rush hours.

## **Dispatch center benefits**

A central dispatch center was conceived to connect riders to the nearest equipped vehicle, from any local taxi or ride service, thus reducing wait times. Some wheelchair users complain it's very difficult to get any service at some hours, but the dispatch center aims to assure services around the clock, as city commissioners requested, Benson said.

Adding a \$15-per-ride subsidy should help keep more wheelchair-accessible vehicles on the road, enabling the owners to defray their higher costs.

Ultimately, 20 to 25 cents of the 50-cent surcharge may go to pay for the dispatch center and subsidies, Cheron said.

Wynde Dyer, a former wheelchair-accessible vehicle driver for Green Cab, likes the idea of one dispatch center that connects customers to the nearest vehicle, no matter the company. "I think that's particularly critical for vulnerable populations with mobility challenges," Dyer said, "so I think it's great that they're going to try it."

John Orr, who drives a wheelchair-accessible vehicle for Radio Cab, spent \$45,000 for a new Mercedes Sprinter, plus \$11,000 for the wheelchair lift, \$1,500 for paint and about \$750 for the meter. It takes longer to serve his customers because they move slower, and it takes time to operate the lift and secure the wheelchair safely.

"Fifteen dollars for a trip is a good thing to help subsidize the more costly van," Orr said.

Add a \$15 subsidy to a \$15 regular fare, and the driver or company would get \$30. "It could be a huge money-maker for the driver," Cheron said. The amounts can be "tweaked" as needed, she said.

## **Some skeptical**

But some say the city project is poorly conceived, and favors Uber and Lyft over traditional taxi services, much like the 2016 city code changes.

Unlike the taxi companies, Uber and Lyft never were required to provide their own vehicles fitted with wheelchair lifts. Instead, they contract out for other companies with rigs to be on call if needed. Uber contracts with First Group to provide rides for people in wheelchairs, said Uber spokesman Nathan Hambley.

It's unclear if a dispatch center will free Uber and Lyft from having to pay outside contractors for being on call for passengers in wheelchairs. But the new plan shifts some of the funding burden to subsidies collected from the surcharge on their customers, and not the individual companies. Uber has "strongly supported" the new plan for wheelchair-accessible service, Hambley said.

## **Radio Cab is critical**

The financial impact on taxi companies likely will differ, as they still have wheelchair-accessible vehicles and retained most of that market share after Uber and Lyft entered the local market.

"We probably provide more than half of all wheelchair rides" in the city, said Steve Entler, Radio Cab general manager. But he fears Radio Cab could lose that business if it directs customers to call the dispatch center instead of his company, as they do now.

"Why would I tell them to call a different number instead of ours?" Entler wonders. "By and by, we could gradually lose those customers."

A lot of customers in wheelchairs, particularly those that have regular medical appointments, prefer to use a driver who provided good service in the past.

"I see a little bit of a problem," said Salomon Ngoy, who drives a wheelchair-accessible vehicle for Green Cab. Ngoy might be the closest vehicle to the customer calling the dispatch center, but he may have an appointment to serve another customer and be unavailable. The central dispatch center may have to work with each company's dispatch service to see who is really available, he said.

Cheron said the dispatch service will give customers in wheelchairs more options. They can still tell the dispatch service they prefer a particular taxi company or ride service, she said.

But there's a catch for drivers and companies wanting the \$15-per-ride subsidy. To qualify, their passenger must use the dispatch service.

So Entler said it's likely his company will participate in the dispatch center program by making its vehicles available, but it won't encourage customers to call the dispatch center instead of Radio Cab.

"We wouldn't get the 15 bucks, but at least we'll still have the customers," Entler said.

Providing good wheelchair-accessible transportation has been a vexing problem for cities throughout the country. Portland officials who planned the new program looked to other cities for ideas, Cheron said, and think they've come across the best solution.

"I think it's going to set a standard for the city going forward," she said. "I really think we're doing more than any other city you can find."

## Willamette Week

### Poll: Most Portland Voters Want Uber and Lyft to Stick Around

*By Rachel Monahan  
March 28, 2018*

**Many say the issue would impact their vote in City Council races. But the poll question doesn't directly address the regulations currently being mulled at Portland City Hall.**

November 2016 was a bad election for, among others, the ride-hailing business in Portland.

Mayor Charlie Hales and City Commissioner Steve Novick, two of the three commissioners who voted to allow the companies into the city, were replaced by Mayor Ted Wheeler and Commissioner Chloe Eudaly—elected officials who were more critical of the companies.

The companies are hoping for smoother roads ahead, and a new poll offers some reason to be optimistic, even as the third vote to approve the companies' entrance into the city—City Commissioner Dan Saltzman—is retiring.

City Commissioner Nick Fish, who has been critical of the companies' approach, is also up for reelection.

The poll, commissioned by the Portland Business Alliance and conducted by DHM Research, shows that 59 percent of likely voters in Portland wanted the companies to stay. (It polled 253 likely Portland voters and had a 6.2 percentage point margin of error.)

It also found that 49 percent say "forcing" the companies "to leave" would make them "less likely" to support "a City Commissioner's reelection." Another 10 percent that it would them more likely to support the candidate; 40 percent don't know.

It's the kind of poll question that looks like an attempt to push a candidate toward a particularly position, given that Fish has no well-funded challengers.

And yet it's not immediately clear why PBA would ask that particular question. The poll, at least as the copy obtained by WW, did not ask questions that correspond with the regulations currently being considered by City Hall, including increasing insurance requirements for drivers and increasing penalties on the companies for evading regulators.

City Council, even with four more critical voices on Uber and Lyft, has not moved to ban the company. There appears to be a recognition that the companies have become a feature of Portland transportation. Fish himself sometimes relies on Lyft for transportation.

"I want to protect consumers and workers," Fish told WW via text message. "Not BAN anyone!"