

Cab drivers decry Patrick's proposed ride-share regulations at hearing



LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

An outspoken crowd dominated a state hearing New Year's Eve on regulating ride-share firms that cab drivers charged hurt their business.

By Nicole Dungca | GLOBE STAFF DECEMBER 31, 2014

Dozens of taxi drivers and industry supporters decried Governor Deval Patrick's proposed last-minute regulations for ride-sharing companies Wednesday, calling the process rushed and urging state transportation officials to get drivers for the popular services off the streets.

"This is government at its worst," Stephen Regan, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Regional Taxi Advocacy Group, said at an emotional and raucous public hearing. "This was all done behind the scenes. There has simply been no input."

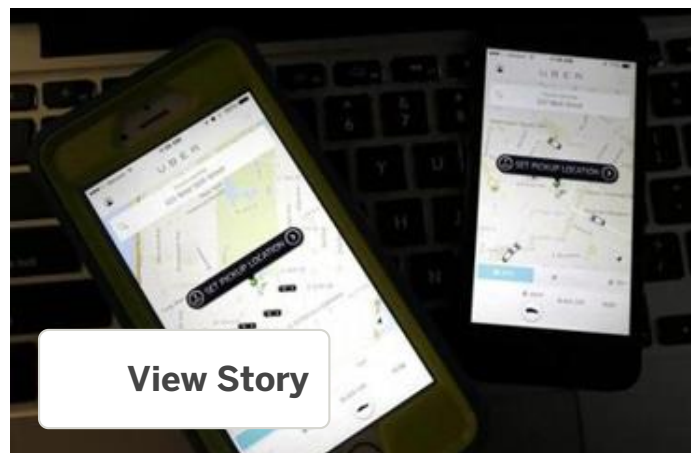
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Battles are raging across the country to regulate companies such as Uber and Lyft. Taxi advocates say the companies, which allow customers to request rides through a smartphone app, are operating with unfair advantages over other for-hire driving services because they are not subject to stringent industry regulations.

Earlier this month, Patrick proposed that the ride-sharing companies be subjected to state oversight. Taxi advocates saw the move as an effort to legitimize the services.

Cyndi Roy Gonzalez, the MassDOT spokeswoman, said **officials expect to file the changes on Friday afternoon. The Legislature must pass a new law before the regulations can be enforced.**

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Uber expected busy New Year's Eve

The ride-hailing app expected this New Year's Eve to be its busiest night ever.

Under the proposal, the Department of Public Utilities would regulate a new category of vehicles called “transportation network companies.”

The New Year’s Eve public hearing at the Transportation Building often turned emotional, as cabdrivers blasted Uber and Lyft for stealing business away from them and threatening their livelihood. At more than one point, the Department of Transportation’s general counsel, Paige Scott Reed, halted the proceedings to remind audience members to be respectful.

Many taxidriviers pointed to the high costs they must pay to operate, including medallion fees and commercial insurance. Chando Souffrant, a Dorchester cabdriver, loudly repeated that ride-share drivers are operating illegally, and that Patrick and MassDOT officials should be ashamed.

“Respect our investment,” Souffrant said. “Don’t treat us like trash.”



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John Miller was among the cab drivers who spoke out. Taxi advocates alleged ride-share services have unfair advantages over taxis, including lower costs and less regulation.

Although outnumbered by taxi advocates, Uber and Lyft supporters Wednesday said the companies are a viable transportation option that helps both consumers and drivers.

Katie Kincaid, a spokeswoman for Lyft, thanked the transportation department for recognizing ride-share companies as an alternative. Kincaid testified that she looked forward to a “fruitful discussion” on the regulations, and said she hoped the definition of “transportation network companies” could be further defined.

Meghan V. Joyce, the general manager of Uber Boston, also said she was submitting a written request to tweak the definition to make sure it encompasses companies like Uber.

“By and large, we are thankful for this opportunity to get a regulatory framework in place,” she said in an interview.

Uber drivers such as Malden’s Margarita Bancy also testified in support of the companies, telling counsel for MassDOT and the Registry of Motor Vehicles that the safety of her passengers is her utmost concern.

“Uber has enabled me to earn money and provide my passengers with a safe convenient service,” said Bancy, who said she started driving for Uber after being laid off.

But MassDOT officials heard far more skepticism about the companies, with taxi supporters sometimes booing and jeering at ride-share supporters. When Dawn Kennedy, a Lyft driver and recruiter from Quincy, testified that driving for the company “gave me back my dignity,” people from the audience yelled out, “Why don’t you drive a cab?”

The proposed oversight comes as Uber has been in the headlines. Earlier this month, a man who worked as a driver for Uber faced charges that he raped and kidnapped a young woman who had called for a ride-sharing service. The company has said he had not been on call during the crime.

The regulations proposed by the Patrick administration would require ride-sharing companies to conduct national background checks and bar drivers with convictions within 10 years for various crimes, sexual abuse convictions, and major traffic violations.

The proposed rules appear to coincide with what Uber and Lyft say they are already doing. The main difference is that they currently do a background check for convictions in the past **seven** years.

On Wednesday, several testified they felt those proposed regulations would come up short.

Frank O'Brien, a vice president with the Property Casualty Insurers Association of America, suggested ride-share drivers operate without valid insurance because **many insurance policies specifically exempt drivers who use their cars as a business.**

Boston Police Department Captain Jim Gaughan, whose hackney carriage unit **regulates taxis**, said he worried that Uber and Lyft were not more forthcoming about their background checks for drivers.

“We’re not able to ensure the public are safe when they get into those cars and that worries us,” he told MassDOT officials.

At times, the hearing resembled a rally calling taxi drivers to action. Andrew Hebert, a manager for a taxi fleet, got one of the loudest rounds of applause after he argued that **recognizing the regulations would be a “death knell” for the taxi industry.**

“I don’t expect that the men and women of the Boston taxi industry are going to go down without a fight,” he said.

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