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Texas Cities Have A Lot Of Ideas About How To Fix Transportation Woes

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The battle to bring rideshare services to San Antonio started heating up last week, as the City Council held a public hearing to debate whether—and how—Uber, Lyft, Sidecar, etc, should be made legal.

That’s a battle, being waged in all four of Texas’ biggest cities, **that we’ve remarked on before**. But things got especially heated in San Antonio’s May 7 hearing. **According to the** *San Antonio Current*:

Lyft asserts it is not a Transportation Company, but rather a Technology Platform. Notably, a taxi driver turned around from the podium, yelling at the Lyft drivers that they “are barbarians attempting to take over San Antonio” and that “you didn’t even ask our permission to be here.” The owner of Yellow Taxi spoke at one point followed by a throng of at least 10 supporters, firmly opposing any change to the Chapter 33 Ordinance.

That sort of rhetoric is, ahem, perhaps a bit overblown (notably, Texan author Robert E. Howard, when chronicling the adventures of Conan the Barbarian, did not once pen a story in which the character shuttled goatherders and blacksmiths around Cimmeria in a car adorned with a pink mustache on its bumper), but it’s certainly true that the bulk of the opposition to these services comes from people

representing the taxi industry.

The notion that companies like Lyft, Uber, Sidecar, and the rest needed to “ask permission” of the taxi drivers to attempt to enter the San Antonio market perhaps speaks to a level of entitlement on the part of industry that people who support the app-based services find galling; additionally, the taxi folks at the meeting rubbed salt in the wounds of the still-outlawed ridesharers by boasting of their ability to offer services in the city **with words emblazoned on their chests:**

At the crowded council committee meeting Wednesday, taxi and limo company representatives, many wearing yellow shirts with the words “Licensed. Insured. Legal,” complained that Lyft and Uber just are trying to skirt the city rules that taxis and limos must follow.

That’s a sick burn toward the unlicensed, **perhaps-uninsured**, not-yet-legal companies out of California that are attempting to enter the market. The sickest burn, however, came from San Antonio police, who **threatened to start impounding the vehicles** of Lyft drivers. The company responded that it would “stand behind” those drivers, though the exact details of that are unclear: Will it pay the fees of drivers who find themselves punished for taking passengers through the service?

All of this, of course, is only relevant for as long as the Chapter 33 Ordinance in San Antonio remains unchanged to consider how to regulate the services (if the city chooses to do so at all). That means we’ll only be having this conversation in the city for, oh, **maybe another decade:**

The Police Department recommends, “establishing a ‘Work Group’ comprised of a local representative from a taxi cab company, a limousine company, transportation network company and the transportation advisory board to meet with City staff to draft revisions to Chapter 33 to permit Transportation Network Companies to legally operate in San Antonio,” which the committee appeared to be leaning towards.

Even so, Councilwoman Shirley Gonzales and Police Chief McManus expressed their dubiousness of a compromise being reached. Gonzales noted the transportation ordinance took 10 years to establish.

An hour or so north of the heated battle, meanwhile, Austin is once more considering

legitimizing these “barbaric” services, by Crom. It’s something that City Councilmember Chris Riley is pursuing as a possible solution to Austin’s ongoing drunk driving problem, which seems to find itself the source of headlines more and more often. **As the *Austin American-Statesman* reports:**

Council Member Chris Riley wants the city to create a pilot program for so-called transportation networking companies, such as Uber and Lyft, and for the city to work with the three taxi companies that operate in Austin to figure out how to meet peak taxi demand.

Many residents have recently expressed concerns about transit options, Riley said, largely because of problems with drunken driving.

“They don’t feel there are adequate alternatives to driving home after a night of drinking,” he said. “If we had better cab service, if we had options like transportation networking companies, and if we had a well-known and convenient public transportation service, then that would go a long way toward providing more alternatives to drunk driving.”

Riley’s proposal includes offering licensure to the ridesharing apps during peak times, when he says that cab drivers often decline to be on the road because of “challenges ferrying people who have been out partying all night,” which we can only interpret as “puking.” Having fewer taxis on the road at the exact moment that Austinites seeking to avoid driving drunk are most likely to need one results in the frustrating experience of dialing the number of Austin’s only to receive no answer, and haplessly attempting to flail down an unavailable cab.

The solution to problems like drunk driving are multi-fold, and it’s seems likely that —along with perhaps an increase in taxi permits that would presumably be similarly opposed by lobbyists in that industry—ridesharing services could be a useful piece of that puzzle.

Of course, newfangled ways of connecting people who need rides with people who will drive them places for money are a good start, but Houston has another plan in mind to improve transportation options in the city: Namely, fixing up its current public transportation system. As the *Atlantic Cities* blog explains, that plan in Houston may materialize in the form of an expanded service that brings more buses quicker, **at no new operating costs:**

One of the biggest challenges facing cash-strapped mass transit agencies is how to improve service without raising costs to the public. Many reach the conclusion it can't be done and opt for an either-or approach: either increase fares or decrease service. Which makes the massive expansion that Houston has planned for its bus network all the more impressive.

Calling attention to the new Houston Metro plan at his blog, *Human Transit*, planner Jarrett Walker **calls it** perhaps the "most transformative transit plan" in the city's history. Walker, who led the redesign of the system, is of course no impartial party here. But the proposed network maps speak for themselves.

Take a look at what's planned for the "frequent" bus network — meaning buses that will arrive every 15 minutes or better:

The maps in the post are impressive, covering a dramatically increased part of the city with buses and lowering costs by reducing redundant routes. The plan is part of **Houston's "system reimagining,"** and it's open for public comment.

That won't solve the ongoing battles of the rideshare companies in Houston—let alone the rest of Texas—but any way to get people around more efficiently needs to be part of the conversation.

Tags: **TRANSPORTATION, UBER, LYFT, SIDECAR, TAXIS, YELLOW CAB, PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION, HOUSTON, AUSTIN, SAN ANTONIO**



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