

UNITED SPINAL^{NOW}

The TNC Mess

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Remember rejoicing when Mayor Michael Bloomberg agreed in the 12th month of the last of his 12 years as mayor to have half of New York City's yellow cabs accessible by 2020?

In 1984 New York City made its buses completely accessible as a result of a settlement with United Spinal Association (then Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association). When Mayor Bloomberg agreed to settle another suit, brought by United Spinal and other disability groups, to make half its taxis accessible, we imagined that just like the bus settlement, the taxi settlement would spur taxi access nationwide.

Before the settlement, the City determined that the Taxi of Tomorrow would be an inaccessible Nissan NV200. Nissan makes their inaccessible taxi in Mexico and ships it to BraunAbility in Indiana for conversion. The conversion renders the NV200 accessible, but it was not the best choice. We found ourselves stuck with it and so did the medallion owners. Incredibly, the Nissan NV200 is not a hybrid despite its designation as the Taxi of Tomorrow by Mayor Bloomberg. It is rear entry, too small and the conversion costs \$14,000 per vehicle – but at least we have some accessible vehicles on the road and people in wheelchairs are actually using them.

While the City and, for that matter, medallion owners, were battling us to keep taxis inaccessible, Uber and other transportation network companies (TNCs) were encroaching on what was exclusively taxi business. Drivers, as well as passengers migrated from cabs to TNCs. Medallion owners found it tough to find enough drivers. Medallion values dropped so dramatically that recently, Melrose Credit Union, which loans money for medallion purchases, was taken over by the state of New York.

Medallions have gone from a purchase price of approximately \$1 million to unsellable. Some accessible cabs sit in lots or are parked on the street and the medallions have been shelved. Melrose has liens on medallions, but if they are worthless, so is Melrose.

Neither the mayor, governor or city council have done anything to fix this. Yellow cabs, which are heavily regulated by the City, are being replaced by lightly regulated TNC vehicles, all of which are inaccessible to wheelchair users.

In December 2012, Gov. Andrew Cuomo championed efforts to sell 2,000 new taxi medallions all of which had to be on accessible cabs. Street hail permits were made available in the four boroughs other than Manhattan, 20 percent of which had to be accessible. The lack of a city-wide dispatch program for accessible green taxis has made them virtually unavailable. Only 350 of the 2,000 medallions have been sold because there is no market for them.

The city council president has not met with the disability community regarding this issue despite numerous requests. The transportation committee chair promised hearings on this subject but none have been held.

Compounding the problem even further, legislation is working its way through the state legislature. If passed, it will authorize TNC operation statewide, not require accessibility but pay lip service to wheelchair users with a “study” about the need for accessible service.

It will prevent localities like Nassau County or Westchester from requiring accessibility. New York City can only regulate TNC vehicles the The Taxi and Limousine Commission (TLC) knows about. Vehicles from Westchester or Nassau will flood our streets anonymously accelerating the extinction of accessible yellow cab service.

The TLC has tried to incentivize drivers to drive accessible yellow cabs unsuccessfully, probably because of a lack of support from city hall, will not require that access be provided by Uber, Lyft and other TNCs.

Inevitably, disability advocates win accessibility wars over time. If the TNCs are up and running and elected officials respond to the community and attempt to require wheelchair accessible service, it will cost the TNCs money and they will look to be made whole by the state or city.

Why not make the responsibility for providing TNC service to everyone (not just people who can walk) the responsibility of the TNCs? Now is the time for government to intervene. The TNCs are hungry and devouring the taxi business. At least make them replace the accessible service they are destroying.