



City of Cambridge

CR #3A

IN CITY COUNCIL

March 31, 1997

COUNCILLOR DAVIS

ORDERED: That the City Manager be and hereby is requested to review the possibility of funding the purchase of a taxi scanner for the License Commission.

In City Council March 31, 1997.

Adopted by the affirmative vote of seven members.

Attest:- D. Margaret Drury, City Clerk.

A true copy;

ATTEST:-

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "D. Margaret Drury".

D. Margaret Drury
City Clerk

COUNCILLOR TOOMEY RECORDED IN THE NEGATIVE ON THIS MATTER.



City of Cambridge

CR #3B

IN CITY COUNCIL

March 31, 1997

COUNCILLOR DAVIS

ORDERED: That the City Manager be and hereby is requested to direct the License Commission to research what procedures other communities follow regarding short trips in taxicabs.

In City Council March 31, 1997.

Adopted by the affirmative vote of eight members.

Attest:- D. Margaret Drury, City Clerk.

A true copy;

ATTEST:-

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "D. Margaret Drury". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the "A true copy;" text.

D. Margaret Drury
City Clerk

City of Cambridge

The Traffic and Transportation Committee held a public meeting on March 12, 1997, beginning at 3:15 p.m. in the for the purpose of follow up on taxi service issues related to vouchers and coupons.

Present at the hearing were Councillor Henrietta Davis, Chair of the Committee, and City Clerk D. Margaret Drury. Also present were Benjamin Barnes, Chairman of the License Commission; Ellen Semonoff, Deputy Director of Human Services; Susan Pacheco, Director of Client Services for the Hospital; Michael Muehe, Executive Director of the Commission on Disabilities; Eileen Ginnity, Executive Director of the Council on Aging; and Susan Goldwitz, Director, Cambridge Hospital Transportation Program.

Councillor Davis convened the hearing and explained the purpose. She introduced Benjamin Barnes to discuss the coupon situation. Mr. Barnes stated that at the last meeting of this committee there was discussion of the problem of taxi drivers not taking City of Cambridge coupons because the radio services were deducting a percentage of the coupon value. He said that he met all three radio services, Checker, Ambassador-Brattle and Union, to clarify the difference between vouchers, for which the services get a percentage and the city's coupon program, and he received written agreement from all three that they do not take any money from the city's coupon program.

Ms. Goldwitz asked if the vouchers will still be subject to the percentage deduction by the radio services. Mr. Barnes said yes, their position is that this is a contract that they have with these programs. The voucher programs with Cambridge Hospital, Somerville Hospital, and various law firms will still be subject to having a percentage taken by the radio services. Mr. Barnes said there is also a problem with drivers who do not understand the coupon program. Information about the coupon program is being added to the taxi school curriculum. He noted, however, that there are still 400 drivers who did not go to taxi school. He stated that he will meet with the 248 owners next month during inspections to discuss coupon problems, but this does not mean that all drivers will have the information. He stressed that it is important for people to continue to inform the License Commission of any situation where a driver refuses to take a coupon.

Councillor Davis invited public comments related to coupons.

A woman who did not wish to be identified said that Union Cab 661-2500 does not take the coupons.

Mr. Barnes said that they may not be able to take certain vouchers because the vouchers are under different programs and particular radio services participate in particular voucher programs, but they must take the coupons. Mr. Barnes said that he will speak with Union Taxi.

Councillor Davis said that all three Cambridge cab radio services are included in the coupon program, and non-radio Cambridge licensed cabs are also included.

Mabel Levarity, Cambridge, said that she had an experience in which the driver tore up the coupon.

A woman who did not want to be identified said that she took a cab that had a sign that said "No coupons." Councillor Davis said that this should be reported to the License commission.

Another woman who declined to identify herself stated that riders should get the cab number first thing. She said that she wouldn't report a cab driver because she is afraid the driver would retaliate. She said that a year ago she got stiffed with a \$20 dollar fare.

Mr. Barnes said that complaints can be made to the License Commission without the complainant giving a name. He agreed that the first thing to do when you get into a cab is to get the medallion number. Every Thursday from 11-3, Virginia Guveyan from the License Commission is at the Senior Center to take any complaints. Mr. Barnes stated that he is also willing to hold any hearings at the Senior Center.

Reza Saburi, 233 Massachusetts Avenue, Arlington, stated that he is a driver of an accessible taxi and that would like to have the bad drivers who have had complaints issued against them here to answer these complaints.

Mr. Barnes said that since he has been attending these meetings there have been two disciplinary proceedings that came about because of facts that came out at the committee hearing. He said that he can have hearings here, but he does not know that he can require drivers who have been subject to disciplinary procedures them to attend as part of their punishment. Mr. Saburi said it would be helpful for them to actually hear the concerns of the elder community.

Bill Cavellini, 9 Speridakis Terrace, said that the medallion number appears on the outside of the cab as well. It is important to look at the number; it is also important to remember the day of the week and the time of day because a particular cab will often have three or at least two drivers on shifts. He suggested that at the next hearing, it would be helpful to have a coupon and a voucher to show the difference. All cabs are not required to take vouchers. It would also be helpful to have a drawing of a taxicab that shows where the medallion numbers are.

At this time, a member of the audience produced a voucher. Abraham Soto, Burlington, owner of an accessible cab medallion, produced a green coupon, and they were exhibited to all of those present.

Mr. Cavellini explained that the vouchers are issued to persons as part of special programs, e.g., a clinic program at the hospital, and the people who have the vouchers will usually know exactly what they are.

Susan Pacheco explained how to qualify for the coupons. They are only issued by two city agencies, the Council on Aging and the Commission for Persons with Disabilities. To qualify for coupons a person must be a Cambridge resident over the age of 60, or a Cambridge resident with a proven disability. She then explained the voucher system and the home care program vouchers.

Councillor Davis asked if it is possible to communicate with all of the drivers in Cambridge to emphasize that all are required to take coupons. Mr. Barnes said that the License Commission could do a general mailing but he is not sure how effective it will be. It may be more economical and effective for him to sit with the owners because they are the ones whose medallions will be endangered by noncompliance. In general, when he wants to get information to the drivers he communicates with the independent driver-owners, the radio services and the owners.

Bill Cavellini suggested distributing a flyer to drivers at inspection time. Mr. Barnes agreed that this can be done. Mr. Cavellini said that he has never received information from the cab owner but he has received information from the License Commission.

Arvilla Sarazen, Cambridge, asked whether all drivers can speak English. Mr. Barnes said that the exam is only given in English; so every driver must read and write in English.

Abdul Kafal, Arlington, owner of new disability medallion, suggested having a sign in each cab that says that these coupons are accepted in this cab.

Mr. Barnes agreed that this is a good idea. He emphasized that there are lots of very good, courteous law-abiding drivers.

Ms. Pacheco raised a concern as to whether such a sign would result in discrimination against vouchers as opposed to coupons.

Bill Cavellini said that the vouchers are more likely to be accepted by the driver because that is part of a contract.

Abraham "Al" Soto, stated that it is up to the owner to police the drivers; it is not up to the City.

Mr. Cavellini said that there is a fair amount of confusion about vouchers and coupons. He has heard the dispatcher side of conversations with other drivers who are asking whether they can take a voucher.

Councillor Davis said that she wants to encourage those present to disseminate the information that these coupons are accepted by all Cambridge taxis.

Reza Saburi, stated that the radio services personnel should be here.

Mr. Barnes said that he met with all of the radio services before this meeting. He stated Joe Silva has attended these meetings in the past and called to tell him that he could not be present at this meeting. The owners of the accessible taxis are required to be here because the License Commission wants them to be the best drivers in Cambridge as part of the privilege of these special medallions.

A woman who did not wish to identify herself said that at 1 p.m. she has tried many times to get a cab to Harvard Square by calling Ambassador. She said that seven out of ten times, drivers do not show up. Now she just says she is going to Belmont Center when she calls. Drivers do not want short trips. The drivers just do not come. She suggested some kind of lottery. She said that you can hear the drivers refusing short trips over the radio when you are riding in a cab.

Mr. Barnes agreed that this is a huge problem, and it is a problem with all the services. The License Commission does not regulate dispatchers, which makes enforcement extremely difficult. The License Commission is trying to buy a scanner so that they can listen to the conversations, so that they can know who is refusing to accept short trips, etc. Mr. Barnes said that the radio service does not own the cabs. The owners/drivers pay the radio services, so the radio services do not want to confront the drivers.

Councillor Davis asked if this is something that a passenger can make a complaint about. Mr. Barnes explained that if he doesn't have information about an actual cab that refused the job, there is no one for him to prosecute. Also, with short fares, the services often do not assign the fare to a particular medallion, they just put it out over the radio and ask for volunteers.

Mr. Cavellini said that this is a very difficult problem to solve. In a previous meeting, he gave four suggestions on how to improve the situation. It is very difficult to pinpoint who is at fault. Sometimes the job will be assigned to a particular driver and then the driver sees someone in the street and picks up that fare in hopes of a longer trip. It can also be the dispatcher's fault for not giving the job to someone at the top of the stand. Dispatchers use a lot of discretion. Sometimes the telephone operator is at fault because they say the cab will be right there with out any knowledge of how many cabs are in the area.

Councillor Davis said the from the passenger's point of view, the telephone operator should give the passenger the number of the cab that has been assigned to the job. Mr. Cavellini said that you cannot tie up the cab telephone line long enough to get the dispatcher to get the assignment and give the medallion number back to the telephone operator.

Councillor Davis said that it is a lie to tell someone the cab will be right there when the person saying this has no idea when a cab will come.

Mr. Cavellini asked if anyone had been asked for their telephone number when they called for a cab, and some of those present said that they had. He stated that his experience is that this happens in bad weather. Mr. Barnes said that it had happened to him in bad weather, the telephone operator said the cab would be there in ten minutes and he didn't get a call back even though it took thirty minutes for the cab to come.

Mr. Barnes said that perhaps the License Commission should license the dispatchers. That would at least stop the rudeness; and it would provide a remedy for drivers not showing up.

Councillor Davis asked what it would take to allow this the License Commission this authority. Mr. Barnes said that this area is regulated by the FCC. There could be a question of pre-emption.

Reza Saburi said that this will not address the question of the independents. Mr. Barnes said that in general there are fewer problems with the independents.

Mr. Barnes said that there is also a problem with the vouchers. The contract is with the radio service and the radio service does not own the cabs and cannot control them. There is also a problem with dispatchers favoring their friends.

Mr. Cavellini said that this problem of dispatchers "feeding" certain drivers does exist, but it is considered a very serious problem and usually is resolved internally. Very few people in this business make a lot of money. If anyone is making money, it is the radio services.

Eileen Ginnity emphasized that the accessible taxi cabs are here to improve service and urged using them. They have cellularphones so it is not necessary to go through the radio services.

Abdul Kafal suggested having radio services assign a certain number of cabs to local service each day.

Abraham Soto said that there is no right to tell cab drivers where they have to drive.

Councillor Davis said that she intends to draft a council order to request that the License Commission provide some recommendations on how to deal with the problem of short trips.

Councillor Davis thanked all those present for their attendance.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:47 p.m.

For the Committee,

Henrietta Davis DMD

Councillor Henrietta Davis,
Chair

A report was received from the Traffic and Transportation Committee, for the purpose of follow up on taxi service issues related to vouchers and coupons.

In City Council March 31, 1997

*Report accepted &
placed in file*

2 orders adopted

*Councillor Gormley
recorded in the
negative in planner
order*