

## Fresno cabbies still fuming over ride-sharing services

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Representatives from half a dozen Fresno taxi companies meet regularly to discuss the problem of unregulated taxi services operating in Fresno. From left: Maricela (Taxi America), Mario Soto (Fresno Cab owner), Al Makki (Yellow Cab owner), Juan (Taxi Azteca owner), Cirano Armas (Taxi Yosemite owner), Manuel (Taxi America), Ranjit (ABC Cab) and Bony (owner Taxi Latino). Months after asking city officials to help even the playing field between ride-sharing services and traditional cab companies, Fresno taxi drivers say they have yet to see any changes.

“We are very disappointed with the way the city is taking this case,” said Mario Soto, owner of Fresno Cab. “They originally said they would have something for us after the new year, but here we are at the end of March and there's still nothing.”

Mark Standriff, director of communication for the City of Fresno, said the city is monitoring the situation between the taxi industry and ride-sharing services as it plays out in Sacramento. He said the city has had no updates for the taxi industry since they initially expressed concern last year.

“We're waiting to see what happens at the state level,” he said.

That answer doesn't drive straight with local taxi operators who say the problem has only grown worse in recent months. Since Uber and Lyft came to town, Soto said he has noticed an increase in unregulated taxis hanging around the Tower District and other night-life scenes, waiting to pick up riders.

“They are painted to look like taxis but they don't have any city permits. They see that the city isn't doing anything about unregulated taxis and they think they can get away with it,” he said. “Why are we paying money to the city for

the protection to operate and they don't even have our back?"

Soto said he regularly meets with representatives from nearly a dozen cab companies including Yellow Cab, Taxi Latino, Taxi Azteca, Yosemite Taxi and Taxi America. The competing companies are mostly in agreement that it's up to the city to deal with the problem caused by Uber and Lyft entering the Fresno market.

Since the Bay Area companies came to town, Soto said he has seen a 50-percent decrease in his profits because of low ridership numbers.

"It's frustrating to be sitting outside of Greyhound or the airport for three hours, waiting for one rider," he said. "And by the time someone comes out, they are just waiting because they have already called Uber."

He contends that the main problem is that companies like Uber and Lyft call themselves ride-sharing services, but actually operate like a taxi company. The pretense allows them to get by city regulations, putting legitimate taxi services at a disadvantage.

"Why doesn't Uber need fingerprints for the city, or pay taxes to the city or have vehicle inspections like we do?" he said.

Those measures are all required by the city before taxi companies, drivers and vehicles can operate within Fresno, said Connie Alfaro, revenue supervisor for the city's business and tax division. The taxi code has not undergone significant changes since 2006 and includes regulations ranging from driver hygiene and behavior to drug testing and background checks.

Adhering to taxi regulations costs time and money, with drivers paying several hundred dollars in annual fees to the city in addition to the \$4,000-\$5,000 cost of commercially insuring each vehicle every year, Soto said.

While the taxi group said it initially had several meetings with city administrators and council members, these talks have grown scarce and the business owners are more often greeted by closed doors.

Al Maaki, owner of the Yellow Cab Company in Fresno, has been in the industry for 30 years but said he fears many companies will go out of business before the city does anything about the situation. He said many drivers are considering taking legal action against the city unless they see some progress.

"Nothing is getting done," he said. "[The city] is supposed to be helping us but they don't even know what's going on."

He said last time the owners group sat down with a city official was when Fresno City Council Member Clint Olivier invited them to his office last month.

"He is really trying to help us out, but there are others who won't even meet with us. [Olivier] is really a nice man and he's really busting his back for us, but his hands are tied," Makki said.

The city forcing services like Uber and Lyft out of the Fresno market is unlikely, said Olivier, and the only solution he can think of for the problem is for the city to help local taxi drivers be more competitive with the Bay Area companies that pay locals to drive.

During his most recent meeting with taxi owners, Olivier said he offered to draft a proposal abolishing regulations for the industry. All city regulations would be dropped, including cab age requirements, interior maintenance rules and city inspections. Only the basic state regulations for taxis would remain in effect, he said.

"There seems to be some division and it's not what [the owners] want. If I'm going to bring anything with the taxis forward, I want their support. I want them to have my back," he said.

Taxi drivers are in agreement that the deregulation offer doesn't go far enough though, Soto said. He stresses that while there is some division within the industry, most taxi drivers want to see a completely level playing field within

Fresno. That would require either all companies offering a taxi service to be held to the same regulations, or none.

“We are tired out it. We were here before Uber came to town,” he said. “We're not going to be able to survive like that.”

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