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DISTRICT OF DEBONIS

Posted at 03:09 PM ET, 05/25/2012

Uber moves closer to being street legal

By [Mike DeBonis](#)

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Uber's promise of a "cheap, classy ride" has been dogged by regulatory questions. (Bill O'Leary - The Washington Post)

You'll recall early this year when this town was consumed by talk of [Uber](#) — the upscale app-dispatched car service — that was the [subject of a sting operation by city taxi inspectors](#).

Uber and its moment of [government oppression](#) became the stuff of national ruminations on [innovation](#) and [regulation](#) (and, more recently, [urban decadence](#)).

Through it all, Uber has carried on with its service, maintaining that it's following all applicable laws and regulations, while the D.C. Taxicab Commission has more or less adopted a policy of salutary neglect.

It now seems, however, that Uber could become uber-legal relatively soon under draft legislation recently passed by a D.C. Council committee. The bill, a rewrite of a [broad taxi reform package](#), includes provisions for a new type of for-hire transportation — "sedan class vehicles."

Those are defined as such: "Sedan class vehicles shall operate exclusively through dispatch and shall not accept street hails. Sedan class vehicles shall calculate fares exclusively using a time and distance method."

In other words, Uber.

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The bill's sponsor, **Mary M. Cheh** (D-Ward 3), said it was her express intent to make sure Uber can do business. "It serves a certain niche," she said. "Why should we kill it if that's what people want? It's not for everybody but there's a slice of the public that wants that."

The language was drafted by the Taxicab Commission itself and establishes a third type of service alongside cabs and limousines. The bill would demand certain things of sedan-class vehicles:

When booking a trip, a passenger shall have access to the rate, method of calculation, and average cost of a trip from the starting point to the destination prior to accepting the trip. The sedan operator shall provide the total fare amount to the passenger before the passenger exits the vehicle. The Commission shall post on its website and periodically update a list of the average fares of sedan class vehicles along particular routes.

Beyond that, the Taxi Commission would have power to make rules for those vehicles "including, but not limited to, the type of vehicles, number of inspections, licensing of drivers, advertising, safety of the driver and of the public, fares, financial obligations, and any other provisions necessary to provide safe public passenger transportation."

"There is a niche for that business opportunity," said **Ron Linton**, the [commission's chairman and an Uber critic](#), "but we're not going to allow one business to dominate it on their own terms."

Uber hasn't yet responded to a request for comment, and I will update if they do. As far as their lawyers are concerned, they're legal as is, and what's proposed would appear to put a wrinkle or three in their business model.

For one, it's unclear whether the sedan class would accommodate Uber's demand-based variable pricing, where rates go up when more riders are seeking cars. For another, it's unclear if it will be allowed or cost-effective for drivers to hold both limo and sedan licenses. Much of Uber's appeal to current limo drivers is that it allows them to keep working even when they don't have a pre-arranged trip. For a third, a new regulatory burden and the prospect of new competition stands to take quite a chunk out of Uber's profits.

But, that said, you now have two key city officials admitting that Uber should exist in some form. So that's progress.

By [Mike DeBonis](#) | 03:09 PM ET, 05/25/2012

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