



PORTLAND, OREGON'S NEWS WEEKLY. NEWS AND CULTURE FOR JUNE 17TH AND BEYOND.

Monday, June 22nd, 2009

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[CITY HALL]

Fare Play

Portland's got a screwed-up taxi market. Now regulators hope to fix it.

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BY COREY PEIN | CPEIN AT WWEEK DOT COM

[September 17th, 2008]

Christopher Whalen ran a limo business in Phoenix until moving to Portland in 2006. His wife thought Arizona was too hot, and wanted to be closer to her family.

Last January, after working as a driver for a year, he started his own company, based in Beaverton. But Whalen needed six months to secure the operating permits from the city of Portland for the sedan and SUV in his seven-car fleet, a delay that cost him thousands of dollars in business.

In Phoenix, taxis are largely unregulated—and a 2007 study by New York City transportation planner Bruce Schaller concluded such lack of regulation leads to headaches with uninsured or unlicensed cabbies. Portland follows a very thick rulebook, but our bureaucratic approach has created a different problem with the business of taxicabs, shuttles and towncars:

The city keeps a lid on the number of taxicabs, shuttles and towncars at 569. But since caps were introduced in 1999, another 232,000 people have moved to the metro area—a 12 percent increase—and Portland International Airport handles another 100,000 passengers a month—a 7 percent jump.

In short, demand has risen, but supply hasn't.

"I found it to be very much a racket," says Whalen, who runs Entourage International Limousines and Transportation.

It wasn't supposed to work this way. City rules require a new study of local demand for taxicabs every two years. But the last such study happened in 2000, because the City Council never wanted to spend the money to update it.

"When you have a moratorium going on for years and years and years, it really creates some terrible pressures on the market," says Frank Dufay, the city's chief taxi regulator.

Worse yet, the 2000 study, which still guides Portland's taxi regulations, was basically built on guesswork. City officials don't know how the permit caps were set back then. "There were assumptions made that you need x cabs for every 1,000 population," says Dufay. "We're not sure where that came from."

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