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Tourism and Gaming

Rate hike isn't only issue on taxi drivers' agenda

By [Richard Velotta / Staff Writer](#)

For months, the Southern Nevada taxi industry has been gearing up for the Nevada Taxicab Authority's annual review of rates.

The authority's board of directors has been talking about the possibility of a "temporary" fuel surcharge for some time. As the date of the annual review grew nearer, board members decided to consider the fuel surcharge, the rate review and a review of the number of medallions each company should have all at one time.

What that means is the 8:30 a.m. June 23 session at Cashman Center is bound to be a lengthy, well-attended, knock-down, drag-out affair.

Not only will the owners and managers of Clark County's 16 taxi companies be out in force, so will dozens of cabdrivers who will make the case that, yes, rate increases are in order, and no, the cab companies don't need to put more cabs on the streets.

Most owners probably will argue for both.

The Taxicab Authority's staff is recommending that the "drop," or the initial fee for hiring a cab, be left at \$3.30. But two other charges - the cost per mile and wait time - should increase. The proposed per-mile charge would go from \$2.20 to \$2.40, and the wait time - which is assessed whenever the cab is traveling less than 12 miles an hour - would go from \$28 to \$30 an hour.

Currently, the way taximeters are calibrated, riders pay 20 cents for every one-eleventh of a mile traveled and 20 cents for every 25.7 seconds the cab is stopped or traveling under 12 mph. The fare boosts amount to a 9 percent increase per mile and a 7 percent increase for the wait.

A 25-cent-per-mile fuel surcharge also is under consideration. It's deemed a temporary fee, one that would be rescinded if the price of gasoline goes down by next January. Otherwise, the Taxicab Authority in all likelihood would do what it did the last time a "temporary" fuel surcharge was added - made it permanent.

I haven't heard an analyst yet who thinks the price of oil is going to decline anytime soon, so it's possible the taxi board is looking at implementing a 20.4 percent increase on rates

when it meets.

The fuel surcharge matter is an interesting quandary for the Taxicab Authority because the rising cost of fuel directly affects some - but not all - drivers. Some companies pay all or a portion of the fuel bill, while others leave that to drivers. Yellow-Checker-Star, three sister companies that constitute the largest group of cabs under one owner, uses propane for its fleet.

Some cab drivers are fearful that rate increases would have dire consequences for them, thinking that higher cab rates would result in a decline in their tip income. Others think the rate increase would help them if customers pay the same tip percentage they always have. If the total fare is higher, the tip would be greater as well.

As hot as the June 23's cab fare discussion is likely to get, drivers have other issues with which they are even more engaged.

The previously mentioned battle over the distribution of medallions is most important to the cabbies. Drivers have had demonstrations one night a month for several months to call attention to their efforts to persuade the Taxicab Authority not to grant more medallions.

And there's more.

Cabdriver Randell Hynes is attempting to establish a nonprofit corporation called the United Taxicab Drivers to support cabbie causes and do battle in District Court on another important issue to drivers. He made it clear the United Taxicab Drivers will not be a union - two union groups already represent drivers in Clark County. Hynes and other drivers have been frustrated that some hotels have steered passengers waiting for taxis to limousines.

Under state law, limos are not allowed in hotel taxi stands unless they have specific charter orders. Limo drivers are not supposed to offer transportation like taxis at hotel cab stands but do, according to Hynes.

Earlier this year, Hynes filed suit in District Court against Harrah's Entertainment alleging the corporation allowed hotel employees to operate taxi stands at its Las Vegas hotels unlawfully. After Harrah's filed a motion to dismiss the complaint, Hynes, who is representing himself, opted to withdraw his action so that he could amend and refile it.

In Hynes' revised complaint, he seeks a temporary injunction to stop all unlawful operations by all hotels, hotel employees, limousine companies and drivers until the trial to make the order permanent.

A hearing is scheduled July 14 before District Judge Jackie Glass.

Hynes also has his eye on the cab allocation issue, placing cab stands on city streets and issues involving traffic and billboard trucks on the Strip.

Next week's debate on rates and allocations may be first of many dust-ups involving the taxi industry.

In other tourism news:

Las Vegas-based Allegiant Air hopes to do something in suburban Seattle that Southwest Airlines couldn't accomplish - fly in and out of an alternative airport.

In 2005 Southwest tried unsuccessfully to fly to King County's Boeing Field. Southwest sweetened the deal by offering to build a terminal and fly there instead of to the more expensive Sea-Tac International Airport.

Neighbors of the airport decried the prospect of continuous noise, even though the Boeing company already scheduled many of its test flights there.

The King County government eventually scrapped the plan.

Now, Allegiant has a similar plan at Everett's Paine Field, north of Seattle. The Las Vegas airline hasn't committed to building a terminal and it's only planning to operate two flights a week to and from the airport.

Boeing also uses Paine Field for some flights and three flight schools are based at the airport, which is in Snohomish County and under a different airport authority.

Federal Aviation authorities have told county officials that they must seriously consider Allegiant's request or risk forfeiting federal grants. But Paine Field neighbors are complaining that Allegiant's flights will be too great a noise nuisance and are demanding county officials reject the plan.

When USA Today reported last month that McCarran International Airport would be among the 10 U.S. airports getting new scanning machines that produce images that leave nothing to the imagination, there was outrage. That outrage multiplied when the Las Vegas Review-Journal matched the story and put it on its front page.

But there really isn't much different now than there was when it was announced four years ago that McCarran was getting these machines for secondary scans.

The difference is that the technology has changed. Instead of backscattering images, using narrow, low-intensity X-ray beams, McCarran will be getting millimeter wave scanners, which use radio frequency waves to produce images.

According to the Transportation Security Administration, the images will be viewed in a separate, closed screening room and the subject's facial features will be blurred for privacy reasons. The images won't be saved - once it's off the screen, it's gone.

Dwayne Baird, a TSA spokesman, said McCarran would get the new scanners and begin testing them in late July or early August and probably would go on line with them a few weeks after the tests.

Once the machines are in use, watch for more coverage and controversy. The American Civil Liberties Union has called the technology an invasion of privacy and has vowed to fight their use.

Look for Wynn Las Vegas to unveil some edgy ads next fall in advance of the Encore's opening.

Discussing the rewards that accompany the risks of an edgy ad campaign, Arnie DiGeorge, group creative director at R&R Partners, said there hasn't been an ad campaign for a hotel like the one that's planned for Encore.

DiGeorge complimented Steve Wynn for taking that approach to create buzz around the new property.

DiGeorge and his partner, Rob O'Keefe, group account director at R&R, also said a new batch of "What happens here, stays here" ads would debut in the fall.

DiGeorge and O'Keefe were among the speakers at last week's **Association of Travel Marketing Executives** conference at Red Rock Resort.

Tradeshaw Week, the leading trade publication of the meetings and convention industry, has named Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority President and Chief Executive Rossi Ralenkotter and Chris Meyer, vice president of convention sales for the LVCVA, as part of its "Tradeshaw Week Power Pack," a list of the 100 most influential people in the industry.

Ralenkotter and Meyer made the list two years ago, the last time it was published.

Las Vegas frequently lands on top of another important list the publication produces - the Tradeshaw Week 200, listing the top 200 trade shows in North America. Las Vegas has been the most frequent host city of those shows in the past 14 years.

The city plays host to about 24,000 meetings, conventions and trade shows every year and last year parlayed them into 6.2 million visitors to the city, generating \$8.4 billion in nongaming revenue.

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