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A MATTER OF WHAT'S FARE

Cabbies want 25% increase in rates

By DAVID SEIFMAN and DAN MANGAN

A major yellow-cab industry group is asking for a nearly 25 percent fare hike — and looks likely to get at least some increase.

"The fare increase is long overdue, without a doubt," said Michael Woloz, spokesman for the Metropolitan Taxicab Board of Trade, which represents about 20 percent of the industry's 12,000-car fleet. "We need it to survive."

Separately, the city is considering a multi-tier fare system, with different rates for regular cabs, new stretch models and minivans.

Under the industry proposal for a 23.36 percent hike, the fare for a trip of 2.64 miles — the average cab ride — would increase from $6.85 to $8.45.

The group said it needs the boost to cover higher costs, such as car prices, and to lure drivers to an industry experiencing a major labor shortage.

The group is asking for increases in the initial charge — from the current $2 to $2.50 — and a boost in per-distance charges, idling time charges and the flat fare from Kennedy Airport to Manhattan. It also wants to extend the 50-cent nighttime surcharge to include weekends and holidays.

The last fare hike — a boost of 20 percent — occurred in March 1996. Increases usually come every five or six years.

The Taxi and Limousine Commission — which has turned down an industry request for a gasoline surcharge on fares — scheduled a public hearing on the increase Dec. 27.

City officials believe that some hike — perhaps 12 percent — is almost inevitable, sources said.

"Twenty-three percent? I think it's too much," said Ahmed Sattar, a Manhattan food vendor. "I'll have to take the subway."

But Brendan Bouffler, a Manhattan engineer, was philosophical. "It's New York — you have to pay extra for everything," he said.

The city's idea for different rates for different types of cabs was announced by Mayor Giuliani and TLC head Matthew Daus.

Daus said Giuliani has asked him to investigate implementing a two- or three-tier fare system in light of the introduction of new stretch Ford Crown Victoria models to the city cab fleet.

"The mayor's opinion, from what he told me, is we should be looking at whatever the additional cost of these vehicles are," Daus said.

The new models, which have six more inches of leg room than regular cabs, sell for 12 percent more.

Ron Sherman, president of the taxi group, seemed taken aback at Daus' suggestion.

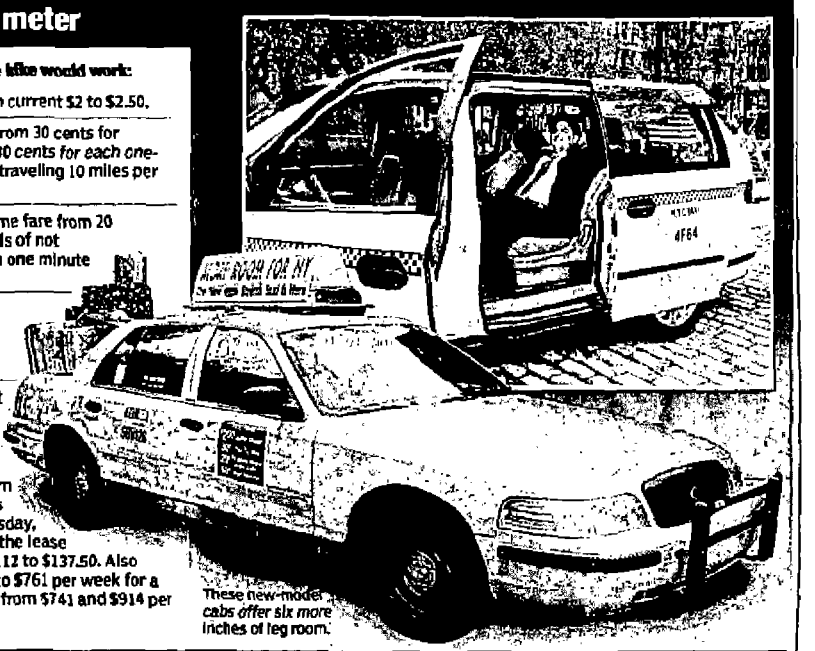
"We're just hearing about it today," he said. "We need to analyze it."

With additional reporting by Joe Cunningham

Read the meter

Here's how the proposed fare hike would work:

- Increase initial charge from current $2 to $2.50.
- Increase current fare rate from 30 cents for each one-fifth of a mile to 30 cents for each one-sixth of a mile when cab is traveling 10 miles per hour or more.
- Increase current waiting time fare from 20 seconds for each 90 seconds of not moving to 30 cents for each one minute of not moving.
- Extend the 50-cent night surcharge to include all times on weekends and holidays.
- Increase current JFK Airport flat rate to Manhattan from $35 to $49.
- Increase standard lease cap for a cab medallion from $103 to $126.50 for all shifts except night shifts on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, when the lease cap would increase from $112 to $137.50. Also boost lease cap from $617 to $761 per week for a medallion and vehicle, and from $741 and $914 per week for a medallion only.



These new-model cabs offer six more inches of leg room.



ALARMING: Cabbies say their feet get hot when they drive Fords.

Ford floorboard might cause taxi fires

A rash of mysterious cab fires in the city may be due to a flaw in the Ford Crown Victoria model, according to a Queens cab fleet official.

Crown Victorias make up the majority of the city's 12,000-car cab fleet, and 65 percent of sedan cabs nationwide.

Seven city cabs have burst into flames for no evident reason — at least two of which were Crown Victorias — in the past two months.

The city Taxi and Limousine Commission is assembling data on each fire and passing it along to Ford.

"We've got a crew together looking into these," said Ford spokesman Mike Vaughn. "This is not normal."

Last year, two Crown Victorias belonging to the 49th Street Management fleet in Queens caught fire, for no apparent reason, within a month of each other.

Those incidents followed some of the fleet's drivers complaining "that their feet were burning, their shoes were melting" while driving, said Nick Stanitsas of 49th Street Management.

Stanitsas said Ford sent a technician to examine the burned cabs.

The technician, he said, found that the fires were due to a coil in the catalytic converter misfiring, and creating extra heat in the converter, which is next to the car's floorboard.

"They told us to change the coils," Stanitsas said. "We've checked the coils constantly, and if a driver complains of his foot being hot, right away those coils are changed."

Two other Queens fleets told The Post they have had Crown Victorias catch fire for unknown reasons.

"I think we need to look at these cases individually" to discover a cause, Vaughn said. *Dan Mangan*

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