

Is Meters vs. Zones Debate Over?

GPS Device Is a Hit With Cab Users, Taxi Firm Says

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Friday, June 23, 2006; B01

In most cities, calculating the cost of a taxicab ride is a straightforward matter of looking at the meter. Taxis in the District cling to the often-indecipherable system of payment zones, with the price announced by the driver at the end.



Guy Agnant, a driver for Washington's Yellow Cab Co., shows off a fare calculator that the company is putting in its cabs. With signals from the Global Positioning System, the device calculates fares on the basis of taxi zones.

Photo Credit: Photos By Gerald Martineau -- The Washington Post

Now, a little-noticed hybrid is being used in a growing number of D.C. taxicabs, one that may someday render moot the debate about meters versus zones by convincing passengers, perplexed by the city's unusual system, that their fares indeed are fair.

For several months, about 100 drivers with Yellow Cab, the District's largest independent cab company, have been using a device called a fare calculator. The electronic instrument, mounted on a cab's dashboard, operates like a meter but uses the boundaries of D.C. taxi zones and the Global Positioning System (GPS). The device lets riders know,

in a way that worn-out zone maps posted on the backs of cab seats cannot, that they have traveled from, say, Zone 1A to Zone 2C. Unfortunately for some expense-account travelers, however, the device prints out electronic receipts. The passenger no longer is given a scrap of paper left tantalizingly blank to be filled out and submitted for expense reimbursement.

The GPS equipment has arrived at a contentious time in the area cab industry.

Mayor Anthony A. Williams has made it clear that he wants D.C. cabs to switch to meters, in line with every other major U.S. city, and a series of public hearings on the issue will be held this summer.

But many cabdrivers who oppose the change are promising a fight; they and other critics argue that under the zone system, fares remain constant, despite gridlock and other delays.

This month, the District completed its first comparative study of meters and zones. Meters, which calculate fares on the basis of distance traveled and time spent idling, were installed in about two dozen cabs, and fares for trips were calculated using both meters and the zone system. The results have not been made public.

Yellow Cab, which has 650 vehicles, is not taking sides on that issue, general manager Roy D. Spooner said. The company, on Bladensburg Road NE, had planned to update its operations, replacing its old-fashioned dispatch room -- where operators slide the scribbled cab requests over to a dispatcher -- with computers and GPS.

Last year, after watching Digital Dispatch Systems, a Vancouver company, demonstrate its fare calculator to the D.C. Taxicab Commission, Spooner and Yellow Cab owner Vaughn Williams decided to give the device a shot.

Spooner and Williams see the fare calculator as an alternative to the zones-versus-meters debate and hope to install the device in more cabs.

"If you listen, people aren't really saying they want meters," Spooner said. "What customers are saying is they want fair and consistent prices. We wanted the public to see this alternative. It's not threatening, and it's very accurate. You can't trick it."

Stanley W. Tapscott, a member of the taxi commission, has called the fare calculator "the wave of the future" and said he helped Digital Dispatch Systems develop the device for D.C. zones. He has been using one of the calculators in the black-and-orange Lincoln Town Car he drives for Capitol Cab.

Some customers encountering the calculator are initially taken aback, he said, mistaking the device for a time-and-distance meter. But by the end of the trip, most seem to like it.

"I've had people get in my car and when I turn this on, right away, they get upset," he said, explaining that the meter starts with the base fare of \$6.50 plus \$2 for the radio call. "They say, 'Why is it \$8.50 when we haven't moved?' I tell them when we cross a zone, it automatically calculates the zone. And then at the end, all I have to do is hit one little button and it will give you a receipt, with everything that was charged. It explains everything -- like a radio call, luggage, if there are three passengers, whatever."

Tapscott estimates the cost of the calculator at \$600 a cab and says he is sold on the device.

"If I have to vote on it, I won't vote on the time-and-distance meter," he said.

Yellow Cab's Spooner will not say how much it is costing his company to revamp operations, but he calls the investment "sizable."

The improvements in radio dispatching, he said, are necessary in a changing District, where affluent residents are moving into pricey condos downtown and leaving their cars behind, relying in greater numbers on taxi service. But only about 800 of the District's nearly 7,000 cabs are radio-dispatched, Spooner said.

Yellow Cab has about 350 of those radio cars, and the company's change to a computer-and-GPS aided system in the next few months "will tell drivers where the work is and tell me where they are," Spooner said. The change also will improve driver safety by making cabs trackable, he said.

The changes that are coming to the D.C. cab industry seem "very good" to Yellow Cab driver Guy Agnant, who has spent 35 years doing things the old way.

On a recent morning, he demonstrated how the fare calculator in his cab works, delighting in the fact that the system "remembers where I picked you up." On a test run, he showed that it is impossible for a driver to cheat a customer with an out-of-the-way "joy ride."

Starting in Zone 2C, he took a leisurely drive through a couple of zones, then returned to 2C. The receipt showed a one-zone base charge, \$6.50.

Recently, he said, on Park Road NW, he picked up a woman who immediately dismissed the calculator by saying, "I know how much I pay." By the end of the ride, when he presented the detailed receipt, "she loved it," he said. "She knew it was right."