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## Drive is under way to improve cab service

**INSIGHT by HEATHER WOOD**

*THE Bermuda Taxi Association (BTA) was formed earlier this year, its goal to improve the standard of transportation on the island and protect the interests of cab owners and drivers.*

*In a wide-ranging interview this week, group president Michael Ray admitted there are many challenges the Association must first overcome, but expressed confidence that with Government support, public co-operation and driver commitment, a better cab service could soon be in place.*



President of the Bermuda Taxi Association, Michael Ray

MICHAEL Ray became president of the Bermuda Taxi Association in February. Comprised of the island's cab owners and drivers, the group had a defined mandate: To become the industry's mouthpiece following the dissolution of the Bermuda Taxi Owners Association a month earlier. "For the last ten months or so we've basically been trying to reorganise ourselves and become the voice of the taxi industry," said Mr. Ray. "We have well over 250 members and we are growing . . . slowly."

There are approximately 600 cars on the road, catering to a population of just over 60,000. In the height of the season, drivers are requested to accommodate between 2,000 and 3,000 calls in a 24-hour period.

According to the president, drivers are capable of meeting that demand but could do so more effectively if a number of issues were addressed. High on the list ?implementing Global Positioning Service (GPS) in vehicles, removing insurance barriers which make owners reluctant to share cars with other drivers and a commitment from the public to a basic standard of behaviour.

Coupled with that agenda are efforts dedicated to increasing and effectively representing the BTA membership.

"The BTA will hopefully serve as the watchdog of the industry itself, working in tandem with the Ministry of Transportation to make improvements to the whole industry," the president said.

"Basically, the Association will be looking for benefits for car owners and drivers, we intend to act as a mediator and spokesperson in dealing with some of the issues facing the industry and we also want to be a catalyst for change."

Most noticeable thus far are efforts the BTA is now making to improve the island's taxi service capabilities through technology, specifically GPS. Having fought its introduction for years, taxi permit holders are now being encouraged to become shareholders in BTA (Dispatching) Limited and subscribe to the service it intends to offer.

Following repeated attempts, legislation regarding the controversial technology was passed in July and Transport Minister Dr. Ewart Brown has given taxi owners until February 6 to implement it in vehicles.

"We were against the mandatory GPS and we stood firm on that but we basically realised we had few options. We could have fought (the legislation) in the courts, but it would have cost us well over six figures. We decided it didn't make sense to go that route and so we pressed forward to establish our own dispatching company, BTA (Dispatching) Limited. It was incorporated in the early part of October, and as we speak, we are undertaking a drive to attract taxi owners to buy into the company.

Mr. Ray serves as interim president of the proposed dispatching company, a separate entity from the BTA. Once a firm commitment is received from stakeholders, the company will rent a premises and staff it with receptionists to take customers' calls.

"We will be able to dispatch work via the GPS system, which is digital," he explained. "Basically, we'll be working on the same principle as when you call Four Star Pizza (now the Upper Crust). The first time the (receptionists) will fill in the database, the second time you call, a pop-up screen will come up with your name and address. We can dispatch a taxi to your house within

minutes."

**ASKED** if the system were any different to the technology put forward by Dr. Brown in 2002, Mr. Ray said not at all. "It's basically the same system," he explained. "There were three systems that were sanctioned ?Raywood Communications, Mobile Knowledge and Digital Dispatching Systems (DDS). We basically have joined forces with DDS, and we're hoping that in the next week or two we will sign a complete contract with DDS to become the subscribers using their (technology).

"It has all the requirements the Ministry had set. It has the MDP, a Mobile Data Panel, a little screen similar to the one you use to text a message to a phone. The necessary information will come up on the screen and GPS actually picks the closest car to send the information to.

"It will certainly cut down on the time that you're waiting for a car. And you'll know the car number. The (receptionist) will tell you that and the distance in minutes, the car is from your house. It's a pretty expensive investment and so we are soliciting car owners out of the BTA ? they number around 550 ?and the 60 BTA members who are not permit owners.

"Our target goal is somewhere in the region of 200 investors and we need about 360 subscribers to make it a viable business. The Ministry of Transportation has stated, without any exceptions, that on February 6, 2006, GPS must be online. So we're working very hard to attract owners to come in to own the dispatching company. It's going to be tight but I think we're going to make it." Placing GPS in cars will not solve all of the industry's issues. According to Mr. Ray, the demand for taxis by late-night revellers can only be met with a change in the insurance policies offered to drivers.

"There is a group of taxi drivers who work the graveyard shift," he said. "My son, for example, works until 4 o'clock or 5 o'clock in the morning. I agree, there are not as many cabs available then as there are during the daylight hours but there are less cabs at that hour because there's less work.

"Taxi drivers are like bees. The bees don't look for pollen where there's no flowers. The taxi driver works on that same principle ?where the work is and when the work is."

He added that owners are wary of sharing taxis, concerned that accidents may happen if drivers fall prey to tiredness.

"It's one of the things that the Association is talking over with the insurance companies. Let's say I own a taxi and you want to drive my taxi. I'd like for you to drive my car, but the last guy that drove my car mashed it up and I had to either pay out of my pocket, or claim on my insurance.

"So what we're trying to do is get the insurance companies to give you your own premium to drive my taxi. That way, if you hit the car or write it off, your premium pays and not mine. That will build a better circulation of cars.

"When I go home at six o'clock, if you want to drive and you show me your premium, I'll have no problem giving you the keys because if you strike it or write it off, your insurance will pick it up. It has happened on numerous occasions where guys have the cars, get in accidents and it becomes a civil case ?where there's thousands of dollars of damage and I have to take (the driver) to court to get my money.

"I think insurance companies have to implement a plan. You have guys working (the day shift), they could have a night driver and, because he has his own insurance, it would work. We have talked with some insurance companies and as we speak today I think it's going to come online." Still, there are other matters to be addressed, the president insisted. With regard to airport pick-up, drivers need a realistic estimate of how many vehicles are needed for incoming flights.

On a more positive note, Mr. Ray did not believe levels of violence are such that there is a need to furnish taxis with shields separating passengers from drivers. "I don't see any need. Not now. I know there are social issues, that the country is suffering, but hopefully it won't get to that point. The new GPS legislation and its equipment includes a panic button. If somebody assaults me or has a heart attack or something like that ?assuming I have enough strength to push the panic button ?it actually can pinpoint where the car is.

"The island's drivers are capable of meeting the demands of the island. To do that, we also want to work with Government, with the Transportation Department, on some of the airport issues. Communication issues ?what time the flight's coming in, how many people are on the flight. People may be moving pre-arranged work.

"So, there's 150 people on the flight and if 100 of them are pre-arranged pickups, there's only 50 people really that are eligible for cabs. So that type of information helps with the flow of things."

**PASSENGERS**, he added, would receive a far superior service if they monitored drinking levels and travelled with smaller bills as to not upset drivers' floats.

"Christmas always brings a rush," he said. "But the guys know that the last three weeks of December are relatively busy and we're up for the challenge. We know that people tend to hang out more then, and some can get drunk.

"When people become intoxicated, they can get very belligerent. If someone comes to the car in a stupor, chances are the driver won't want to take them. I've had a couple of passengers actually



(throw up) because of the movement of the car. And once that happens, the car is done for the day or the night. You get a bit sceptical about putting a person in the car who's intoxicated. "And so we appeal to the public as much as we would like to serve you, we're here to serve you, please work with us. If you are intoxicated beyond comprehension, try and work with us. They're simple things really. It's hard to make change if we keep getting \$50 notes. They take up most of our float. Work with us, try and keep smaller bills."

Asked if he was content with service at present, Mr. Ray said there was definitely room for improvement. "No. I'm not happy. There are many areas that we need to improve. But hopefully with BTA (Dispatching) Limited ?which is going to be taxi owner owned ?we're going to tighten up where it needs to be tightened up. We're going to be working again with the Ministry. "And hopefully we can get this thing together and make the taxi industry what it can be, what it should be. We're out to improve and make the taxi industry number one on the island."