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## Hailing the Wrong Taxi

By MATTHEW W. DAUS

WHEELCHAIR users have long been deprived of a quintessential New York City experience: riding in a taxi. So after years of discussion, litigation and experimentation, the governor and the mayor of New York last month **announced a deal** to put 2,000 wheelchair-accessible cabs on the streets, setting aside **up to \$54 million** in subsidies and loans to retrofit vehicles for wheelchair use or buy new wheelchair-accessible vehicles.

The plan is well intentioned but might not achieve the desired results. Rather than improving access for the disabled, it will require taxpayers and the taxi industry to foot the bill for taxis that will in all likelihood rarely be used by the target ridership. A more sensible alternative would be to set up a small fleet of wheelchair-accessible cabs that disabled passengers could call upon, through a centralized dispatch system, at any time of day or night, as part of the region's mass transit system.

**Advocates** estimate that there are about **60,000 wheelchair users** in the city — and that's not counting out-of-town visitors. No one doubts that getting around New York in a wheelchair can be daunting. Most subway stations are not accessible; many bus stops are too distant for wheelchair users to reach; and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's van program for the disabled requires registration and making a reservation, usually days in advance.

In response, the state and the city now plan to sell 2,000 new taxi medallions (the current total is 13,237) that will be designated for wheelchair-accessible vehicles and issue 18,000 permits — one-fifth of them wheelchair-accessible — for a new class of livery cabs that will be permitted to pick up street hails in upper Manhattan and the four other boroughs, areas traditionally underserved by yellow cabs.

But simply putting more accessible vehicles on the street is impractical and, for many, unaffordable. Drivers of accessible cabs would find it difficult to find space in the middle of heavily congested streets to accommodate wheelchair users; insurance premiums for drivers and vehicle owners are likely to rise; and many disabled riders would far prefer home pickup to an uncertain wait on a corner in bad weather (though advocates for the disabled are loath to admit it).

The new plan put forward by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg is partly a response to judicial pressure. On Dec. 23, two days after the deal was announced, a federal judge in Manhattan **ruled** that the taxi commission had failed to comply with the Americans With Disabilities Act by not providing sufficient wheelchair access. The judge even stopped the city from auctioning any new permits or medallions unless they are all accessible and until a plan is approved by the court.

There is a better approach: a centralized taxi-dispatch system for disabled riders. From July 2008 to June 2010, the Taxi and Limousine Commission tested such a system. When riders called the city's 311 information line, a company dispatched one of 232 accessible yellow cabs to pick them up.

The **results** were not promising, but also not conclusive. The median wait time was 22 minutes. Only 2,700 individuals used the service — and most of them for just one trip per year. Only about eight rides took place each day. The \$1 million budget for the 5,828 trips taken meant that each trip cost, on average, \$172. The overwhelming majority of the rides began and ended in Manhattan (as is typical of cab usage in the city).

However, I believe the disappointing results were more a reflection of the high cost of riding a cab — a particular deterrent for people who are on fixed incomes — than of the challenges of a dispatch system.

My proposal is this: convert the existing van program run by the M.T.A. into a system of subsidized door-to-door taxi rides. The van system, known as paratransit or Access-a-Ride, spends more than \$380 million a year. The average cost per ride is \$30 to \$50, which I believe could be lowered to \$12 to \$15 if the little-used vans were replaced with accessible cabs. The system would rely on usage patterns to determine the right number of cabs — instead of setting them by fiat. Passengers would pay \$2.25 a ride (with a discount for purchasers of certain fare cards), the same cost as a subway trip.

The M.T.A. has been testing such a program; it should become permanent. It would allow the use of custom-built vehicles instead of retrofitted ones. The M.T.A. or the city would enforce service standards to ensure that wait times were reasonable and drivers properly trained. Over time, as the service became more reliable, demand would rise — after all, door-to-door service for the cost of a subway ride is far cheaper than hailing a retrofitted yellow cab. One model for this is Chicago, where only 90 wheelchair-accessible cabs (about 1 percent of the total fleet) are efficiently dispatched through a single toll-free number.

Congress could also help. The Americans With Disabilities Act, enacted in 1990, exempted taxicabs, but subsequent federal regulations required cabs for the disabled to provide

“equivalent service.” So governments are not required to provide accessible cabs, but if they do, they are open to being sued (as New York City was) for discrimination. The act should be amended to provide incentives for disability access instead of punishing municipalities that try to do the right thing.

Putting thousands of accessible cabs on the road looks good in theory, but how it will work in practice is a different matter. Quite possibly, the result will be further irritation — not enhanced mobility — for disabled New Yorkers.

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