

State Should Regulate Uber, Lyft, Limo Services & Taxis Uniformly: Cameron on Transportation

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It looks like the fate of Uber — and Lyft, the other popular ride-sharing service in Connecticut — will be decided in Hartford in a lobbying war, not in the competitive marketplace.

Uber has enjoyed strong growth since launching in Connecticut three years ago, using 9,000 drivers who carry hundreds of thousands of passengers annually. I am one of those customers and am very happy with their service.

I tried Uber after getting sticker-shock for the “black car” limo fees to New York airports: more than \$180 one way from my home to JFK vs. \$80 with Uber. Mind you, the rides are different: the limo is a real limo,

and the Uber X is some guy's personal car.

The limo driver has a commercial driver's license and has undergone extensive screening and drug testing. Uber screens its drivers, but now will consider non-violent felons to join their fleet (and I'm OK with that — everyone deserves a second chance).

The limo driver has tons of insurance. The Uber X driver is covered by the company's policy when he's carrying a passenger. Connecticut law says taxis and limos must undergo extensive safety inspections each year. The Uber X driver doesn't.

But if you have a problem in a taxi or limo, where do you file a complaint? All cars for hire in Connecticut are regulated by the state Department of Transportation and we know how responsive they are to public complaints. But if you have a bad Uber ride, you can complain immediately using its app. I have done that, on rare occasion, and received an immediate response — and a small refund.

There's a big difference between a shiny limo and a beat-up taxi. Local taxis tend to be older and in pretty bad shape. Their drivers are rarely the owners, so what do they care about the condition of the vehicle?

Uber takes heat for its "dynamic pricing" model where rates go up with demand. Need an Uber during a bad storm? You'll pay more to incentivize drivers to stay out on the road. But taxi meters do not know "surge pricing."

Neither driver is making a lot of money. One study pegged Uber-X drivers to an average \$15.68 an hour. And Uber prides itself on its no-tipping model, though I always tip for good service. These folks are just trying to make a living.

But if you believe recent testimony in Hartford, the state's taxi industry is on the verge of collapse. They say they can't compete with Uber and Lyft if the playing field for regulations isn't level. They make a good point.

Is it fair Uber and Lyft do not pay state sales tax? Is it fair out-of-state Uber drivers can pick up Connecticut passengers, but state drivers have to return empty from NYC runs? Is it fair Connecticut taxi and limo drivers are held to a much higher safety, licensing and screening standard than the college kid driving his Toyota for Uber on weekends?

Uber officials say these issues are up for grabs as they negotiate with lawmakers in Hartford. For three years, Uber has been able to kill bills that would have regulated its industry, once hiring a lobbyist for \$20,000 for a single day to thwart an unpopular bill. I guess even lobbyists have "surge pricing."

I like Uber (and Lyft) and hope they survive. But I also like reliable and affordable taxis and black cars and think they are over-regulated. Let's level the regulatory playing field and allow competition to see who serves customers best.

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