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City Council: Cut regulations for taxis, Uber

Elida S. Perez, El Paso Times Published 8:04 p.m. MT May 17, 2016 | Updated 8:14 p.m. MT May 17, 2016



(Photo: RUDY GUTIERREZ/EL PASO TIMES)

The City Council on Tuesday directed staff to draft another version of the taxi ordinance that will loosen regulations for traditional cab and newer transportation network companies like Uber to compete on a level playing field in the city.

In August, city Rep. Emma Acosta had requested the taxi ordinance be revised to allow for companies like Uber to operate legally in the city. On Tuesday Acosta said she thought the individual companies should self-regulate, pay a franchise fee to operate in the city and sign affidavits that confirm the drivers are following state regulations.

"I think we need less regulation, not more," Acosta said.

Not everyone agreed.

Joe Olivar, who owns Border Taxi Cab Co., cautioned against deregulating the industry.

"You are making a big mistake," Olivar said. He added that some regulations that help ensure public safety are necessary.

Olivar also said the city is still allowing Uber to operate illegally while it tries to determine how to change the ordinance.

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Uber, an international ride-hailing service that uses smartphones and GPS systems, launched in El Paso in June 2014.

Trying to establish itself as an easy alternative to taxi and shuttle services, the company has been operating without having to undergo the same permitting, inspections, vehicle requirements and fee schedules that taxi drivers and other companies have to follow.

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City Rep. Carl Tolbert also disagreed with deregulating the industry.

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"In our society you need to have rules and the rules need to apply to everyone," Robinson said. "Why not deregulate restaurants? Builders? Doctors?"

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Robinson abstained from the vote to direct staff to draft a new ordinance with less rules. All other city representatives voted in favor.

The new ordinance would have required transportation network companies like Uber to apply for city-issued operating permits, driver permits and vehicle permits, among other requirements — as had been requested by council in August.

The council instead voted to direct staff to loosen regulations after an hours-long discussion and more than a dozen people expressing both support and concerns about Uber's services in the city.

Assistant Police Chief Michelle Gardner said it took about eight months to rewrite the ordinance in order to fulfill the request. Staff held about 17 community meetings with stakeholders before finalizing a draft of the new ordinance.

The City Council asked that the new version be presented within 30 days.

City Manager Tommy Gonzalez said staff will need until mid-July to present a new draft of the ordinance.

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In other action:

- Jim Tolbert was sworn into office to represent District 2.
- The City Council approved an ordinance to issue the 2016 series of certificates of obligation not to exceed \$100 million. Council also approved an ordinance to issue the 2016 series of general obligation bonds not to exceed \$200 million.
- The council approved the creation of the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Working Group to identify strategic locations for affordable housing developments. The working group will consult with officials from the El Paso Housing Authority. Members were also appointed Tuesday.
- The City Council approved motions to allow city staff to find economic incentives to enhance film industry development in El Paso. The city will also write a bill to add to the city's Texas Legislative Agenda for increased economic incentives in order to compete regionally and nationally as a television and film destination.
- The council approved a resolution authorizing the city manager to sign a challenge grant and naming rights agreement between the city, the Hunt Family Foundation and the El Paso Museum of History to rename the digital wall pavilion located at the museum to the "The Hunt Family Pavilion" in return for a \$500,000 challenge grant to the El Paso Museum of History Foundation.
- The city's Office of Emergency Management said it is aiding area shelters and organizations with necessities during the arrival of thousands of Cuban refugees. Officials with El Paso's Diocesan Migrant and Refugee Services said two planes with at least 150 Cubans are expected to arrive in Juárez daily, resulting in about 3,500 or more refugees who need assistance to get to their final destinations. Sun Metro will also begin to aid in the efforts to get the Cuban refugees to area shelters upon their arrival to El Paso, officials said.

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