

Famous rodent fits right in at cab debate

Don Braid

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Monday was a perfect day for Walt Disney's most famous rodent to stroll through City Hall. Rarely has a council debate been more worthy of Mickey Mouse.

Council finally passed a unified taxi bylaw. It has 96 pages, 184 sections and so many rules that I doubt any driver will ever read or understand half of them.

Council spent 40 minutes debating whether drivers should have to consult passengers before answering their cellphones.

"We already have a rule about phones," says Roger Richard, owner of Associated Taxi. "But it's just common sense, you know?"

He means that if a driver is being beaten over the head, he's allowed to call 911, rule or no rule.

But council went ahead and codified that provision; now a driver could be disciplined if he uses the phone without passenger consent, for any reason.

Several aldermen with common sense asked why, if cellphones are to be effectively banned for safety reasons, the city should allow cabbies to talk to dispatchers. Isn't that unsafe, too?

Good point, but it didn't matter. Council took this provision -- first intended to stop a few rude drivers from talking to their girlfriends -- and turned it into a safety issue.










"This is the most over-regulated industry in the city," says Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, whose committee finally coughed up the bylaw that passed.

"Private business owners are treated like children. It's ridiculous."

During the debate, Ald. Madeleine King said "normally, this is a laissez-faire city," as if to apologize for the regulation.

But Calgary is not at all relaxed about these things.

Council has just regulated smoking. Last year, it went after cats and certain human activities such as peeing and spitting. Every year at Stampede, health authorities terrorize restaurants serving flapjacks and sausages.

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Some of the rules are necessary, but a great many are not. Anybody who reads the bylaws could conclude that Calgary is one of the most regulated cities in North America.

The taxi bylaw passed, but the three-year battle isn't quite done yet.

In spring, council will consider how the cab companies are governed. And the owners -- including Richard and Len Bellingham of Mayfair Taxi -- want nothing more to do with Calgary Transit.

They say Transit's influence over the industry is a conflict of interest, partly because many Transit operators also drive cabs in their spare time.

Anything that helps the cabbies tends to draw scarce drivers away from the buses -- so Transit doesn't like fare increases, the owners say.

"It is definitely a conflict, and it's been going on for years," says Bellingham.

Colley-Urquhart agrees.

"Trust is completely gone between Transit and the companies," she says. "There is a conflict, and Transit should not have this kind of influence."

Mayor Dave Bronconnier, however, feels Transit's role in regulating taxis is essential.

"It's not a conflict at all," he says. "London has one of the world's best transportation systems because everything is run by one authority -- trains, taxis, tubes and buses. That's the best way to do it."

That battle comes later.

For the moment, everyone involved is relieved (mainly because of exhaustion) that the main bylaw is finally settled.

Now drivers can go out and ignore the Mickey Mouse provisions.

dbraid@shaw.ca

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