

Uber, other ride-sharing services gearing up for state fight in Legislature

BY: James L. Rosica

POSTED: 8:05 PM, Mar 8, 2015

UPDATED: 2:43 PM, Mar 9, 2015

TAG: politics (/topic/politics) | politics and government (/topic/politics+and+government) | on todays 1a (/topic/on+todays+1a)

TALLAHASSEE — Some state lawmakers are doing what they can to help Uber, with bills filed in both chambers for the smartphone app-based car service.

State Sen. Jeff Brandes, a St. Petersburg Republican, this year filed a bill setting statewide standards on insurance coverage and background checks. That would clear the way for Uber, and similar upstarts like Lyft, to break free of some local regulation. Previous pro-Uber bills failed last year.

Another bill in the House filed by state Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fort Walton Beach, goes even further, totally reserving regulation to the state and cutting out local bodies, such as Collier County code enforcement investigators.

The battle for San Francisco-based Uber pits the new against the old: An emerging technology favored by urban millennials against the legacy taxi and limousine services that say the new services don't play fair. Customers use an application on their smartphone to find available Uber drivers, who may use their own vehicles and don't necessarily carry commercial insurance.

The "transportation network companies" say they're technology companies first — not taxi services.

Taxi and limousine operators, on the other hand, have said these newcomers are unfair competition because they don't play by the same rules, including rules governing minimum wait times and fares.

Unlike cabs, Uber's prices can spike during times of high demand, such as bad weather. But its fans say drivers' response time can be much faster than cabs.

"We applaud Sen. Brandes and Rep. Gaetz for taking this important step forward in establishing clear, uniform rules for ridesharing across the entire state," Uber spokesman Taylor Bennett said. "We look forward to continuing to work with the Legislature and providing access to safe, reliable rides and the jobs they create."

The service began operating Dec. 4 in Southwest Florida. Uber wants to offer service legally in Collier and Lee counties, and elsewhere in Florida.

Locally, Collier County code enforcement investigators have actively hunted for Uber drivers, posing as passengers and using the app to call drivers, who are then hit with citations when they arrive if they don't have the same license, driver ID and insurance required of all other for-hire drivers in the county.

Uber drivers had racked up more than \$25,000 in fines through Feb. 22, with more than 25 citations issued to a handful of Uber drivers, county records showed.

Code enforcement investigators in Lee County have yet to issue any citations to Uber drivers. The Lee County Attorney's Office has been working with the county's Tax Collector's Office on new taxi laws. County commissioners have raised questions about how to treat Uber as part of that rewrite.

The new laws will "enhance Lee's ability to address the Uber-type business concept," said Lee County Attorney Richard Wesch in a recent statement.

His office expects to bring its proposed changes to county commissioners March 17. If approved that day, the new laws would take effect Aug. 1.

Uber, meanwhile, is ready for a fight this session in the Legislature. It has retained up to 22 lobbyists for the 2015 legislative session, according to state registration records. They include heavy-hitters Brian Ballard, Jennifer Jankowski Green and former Republican Party of Florida chairman Al Cardenas.

Lyft has three lobbyists registered for the session.

The Florida Taxicab Association has eight lobbyists, records show, including veteran Ron Book; former state Sen. Ellyn Bogdanoff of Fort Lauderdale; and Chris Finkbeiner, former deputy chief of staff to Gov. Rick Scott.

Roger Chapin, a taxicab association board member, said Uber drivers often think they're covered under their personal car insurance if they get into a wreck while giving a ride. Chapin said insurers can and do cancel policies if they learn an accident happened while a personal vehicle was "for hire."

Brandes' bill, among other things, would mandate automobile liability insurance of "at least \$1 million in coverage for death, personal injury, and property damage."

"This year, our primary interest is clarifying the insurance requirements," said Chapin, also executive vice president of Orlando-based Mears Transportation Group, a Central Florida taxi and hired-car provider.

"But we don't want to see local (regulators) pre-empted from having their own requirements," he said, if those would differ from the state.

Brandes, who chairs the Senate's Transportation committee, offered an olive branch to the taxi operators in his proposal.

It would force Uber and Lyft drivers to "only accept rides booked exclusively through a ... digital network or software application service."

Drivers "may not solicit or accept street hails," the bill adds.

Brandes, who has the Uber app on his iPhone, says residents and visitors deserve 21st century transportation options.

"We should be able to provide first-class service to tourists and business travelers who visit our state," he said.

Scripps reporter Laura Layden contributed to this report. Contact Tribune reporter James Rosica at jrosica@tampatrib.com and (850) 765-0807.

