



LETTER: Don't sacrifice safety to Uber

As the state Legislature again gears up to try and pass legislation to regulate app-based transportation companies like Uber, two critically important issues are being lost: vehicle safety and fairness.

In 2010, the state eliminated the need for passenger vehicles to undergo regular safety inspections and now only requires inspections for emissions. However, taxis and limos were not exempted and are still required to be inspected for safety every single year. Unfortunately for Uber passengers and for everyone else on the road, Uber vehicles are not required to be inspected for safety violations.

It's one thing if, as an individual, you make the choice to drive yourself around in an unsafe vehicle. But when a consumer is paying for a service by getting into an Uber vehicle, they should have the expectation, if not the guarantee, that this vehicle is in compliance with all New Jersey safety laws.

Annual safety inspections are the only way to guarantee safety. A glance at the windshield sticker is all it takes for a passenger to know that the vehicle they are getting into is as safe as can be reasonably ensured.

As any auto technician will tell you, there has been a marked decline in safety-related repairs since the elimination of safety inspections. While many motorists do pay to ensure that their car is safe, there are too many who forego necessary repairs just to save a few bucks. Previously, they would have made the repairs for fear of being denied an approval sticker. Absent the fear of losing that sticker, our roads have become more dangerous.

While previous versions of Uber legislation addressed this problem at least in part, the current legislation being debated in Trenton has removed it completely. It is an unfortunate change for consumers and for others on the road, considering the cost of safety inspections is small.

With a small price and a big benefit, why would anyone oppose it? And why aren't our legislators fighting for it?

In addition to the issue of vehicle safety, there is the broader issue of fairness. Is Uber different in any meaningful way from taxis or limousines? If taxis and limos must undergo safety inspections, then so should Uber. If taxi and limo drivers must undergo fingerprinted background checks to ensure passenger safety, then so must Uber drivers.

When Uber gains a competitive advantage because of the success of their app, or because of greater efficiencies, then they deserve to be rewarded by greater business success. But when their competitive advantage is due to actions or inactions by the government, then an injustice is occurring. Our laws govern everyone equally and it is illogical and immoral for any company to gain additional advantage by keeping the playing field unlevel in their favor. Uber must comply with the exact same regulations that taxis and limousines must adhere to.

By not acting, the state is pressing its thumb down on the scale, and doing so in favor of what is now one of the largest and most powerful corporations in the world. The state is unfairly distorting the free marketplace, and the immediate victims are independent small businesses. With independent companies being placed at a disadvantage by the government, it is only a matter of time before they are squeezed out. When Uber is the only transportation company left in town, does anyone seriously think they will continue to put a premium on affordability and quality? Ultimately, consumers will suffer.

Hopefully our legislators and the governor will realize that even though time and technology changes, the importance of safety and fairness is eternal.

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