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TLC NEWS | TESTIMONY

Testimony Before the City Council Transportation Committee Re: Intro. No. 664 Monday, June 27, 2005 – 10:00 AM

Matthew W. Daus
Commissioner/Chair
New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission

Good morning Chairman Liu, Council Member Yassky and members of the Transportation Committee. My name is Matthew Daus and I am the Commissioner and Chair of the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission (TLC). Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you again, this time to provide testimony relating to Intro 664. Today, I will provide an update on the TLC's efforts regarding alternative fuel taxicabs since my last appearance before this committee, just over a week ago. As I discussed during my earlier testimony, the TLC's Board of Commissioners held a public meeting last Monday, at which Council Member Yassky was gracious enough to attend and participate. At that hearing, the Commissioners engaged in a vigorous discussion about the use of alternative fuel vehicles as medallion taxicabs and the potential impact upon passenger comfort. Council Member Yassky delivered a presentation regarding clean-fuel taxicabs, and the agency's staff provided some initial results of its research on alternative fuel vehicles.

The Commission's discussion noted the importance of passenger needs. Each vehicle the TLC approves as a taxicab is on the road for at least 3-5 years, providing on average 20,000 passenger rides annually. We take this responsibility very seriously and want to ensure that the vehicles are reliable, comfortable and that they can stand up to the test of being a New York City taxicab.

Just a few years ago, the TLC, the taxi industry, and vehicle manufacturers were able to work together to address two pressing needs with two very different outcomes. The first was cleaner taxicabs by utilizing Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) technology. While I feel the CNG movement was well intentioned, the effort within the taxi industry, despite significant financial commitment, was unable to overcome logistical and infrastructure needs at the time and the program was discontinued.

The second program focused on the pressing issue of passenger comfort, which has had a more successful outcome. It took some time, and lots of hard work on all sides – but in the end the product that was delivered, the Stretch Crown Victoria, was a much better vehicle for everyone.

Today, the taxi industry is once again faced with a similar challenge to improve its vehicles. There is a compelling need for today's vehicles - not just taxicabs but all vehicles - to be cleaner and more fuel-efficient. As we did five years ago, we are ready to partner with everyone who can help – the Council, environmental advocacy groups, the taxi industry, vehicle manufacturers and, of course, passengers – to reach that goal. Too often, the debate on this issue has seemed to boil down to more passenger space versus cleaner vehicles. It does not have to be either/or. We can push for both and I believe that in time, perhaps as soon as vehicle model year 2007, there will be vehicles offered that are both clean and offer desired passenger comfort.

At the conclusion of the Commission meeting, we asked TLC staff to recommend a program and authorizing rules to allow the use of alternative fuel vehicles as taxicabs.

It is our goal to place hybrid vehicles on the road as taxicabs by this Fall. Our basic timeline is as follows:

- At the July meeting of our Board of Commissioners (tentatively scheduled for July 26), the staff will present the proposed program, along with draft authorizing rules – and the Commission will begin to accept public comment and testimony on those rules.
- In accordance with the rulemaking process under CAPA (the City Administrative Procedure Act), at the following Commission meeting (which depending on the schedules of our Commissioners could be held in late August or early September), I will ask our Board to consider voting on these proposed rules. A public hearing will be scheduled to take place at this meeting and prior to any vote. If these rules are approved, vehicles could be on the road as soon as 30 days thereafter.

The staff has already begun working on the program and rules; they have also made initial contacts to various constituencies, including some of the groups represented here today, as well as several vehicle manufacturers including Toyota, Ford and General Motors.

The program we will recommend to the Board of Commissioners in July will include vehicle specifications that would allow for one or more of the alternative fuel vehicles currently on the market to be used as taxicabs. The vehicles would be subject to regular inspections, and perhaps additional inspections beyond the current 3-times-per-year requirement for all taxis. Driver and passenger satisfaction surveys, as well as surveys of those who maintain such vehicles, could also be included in the program to help evaluate their success.

We are exploring ways in which the program could be targeted towards replacing the oldest and smallest vehicles in our fleet - those already scheduled for vehicle retirement within the next few months. For example, the test could be limited to those vehicle owners who are retiring non-stretch Crown Victorias.

Intro 664 would require the TLC to approve a hybrid vehicle and make it available for any of the nearly 13,000 medallion taxicabs within 90 days. We believe that a program targeted at the oldest and smallest vehicles would better ensure that we minimize the impact on passenger comfort while also realizing environmental benefits. As we start this program, we should focus on getting older Crown Victorias (with only 39.6 inches of legroom) replaced with alternative fueled vehicles, rather than giving up on the hard-fought gains in passenger comfort in the newer stretch Crown Victorias (with 45.6 inches of legroom). This incentive to replace the oldest vehicles in the taxi fleet with new and cleaner vehicles would apply to almost 2,000 vehicles scheduled for retirement during the upcoming fiscal year.

The program I have outlined today would place clean fuel taxicabs on the road, and allow for the careful evaluation of new vehicles that we feel the riding public deserves. The TLC sees this program as the first step in an ongoing process to continually improve the cab.

In sum, I must oppose the enactment of Intro 664 as currently drafted, only as to the manner of implementation. I am ready to support this bill if the second and third sentences of proposed Section 19-533 of the Administrative Code are deleted. These modifications would ensure the Commission has the flexibility to define alternative fuel vehicles as technology continues to develop in this area, as well as to set forth the manner of implementation.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

