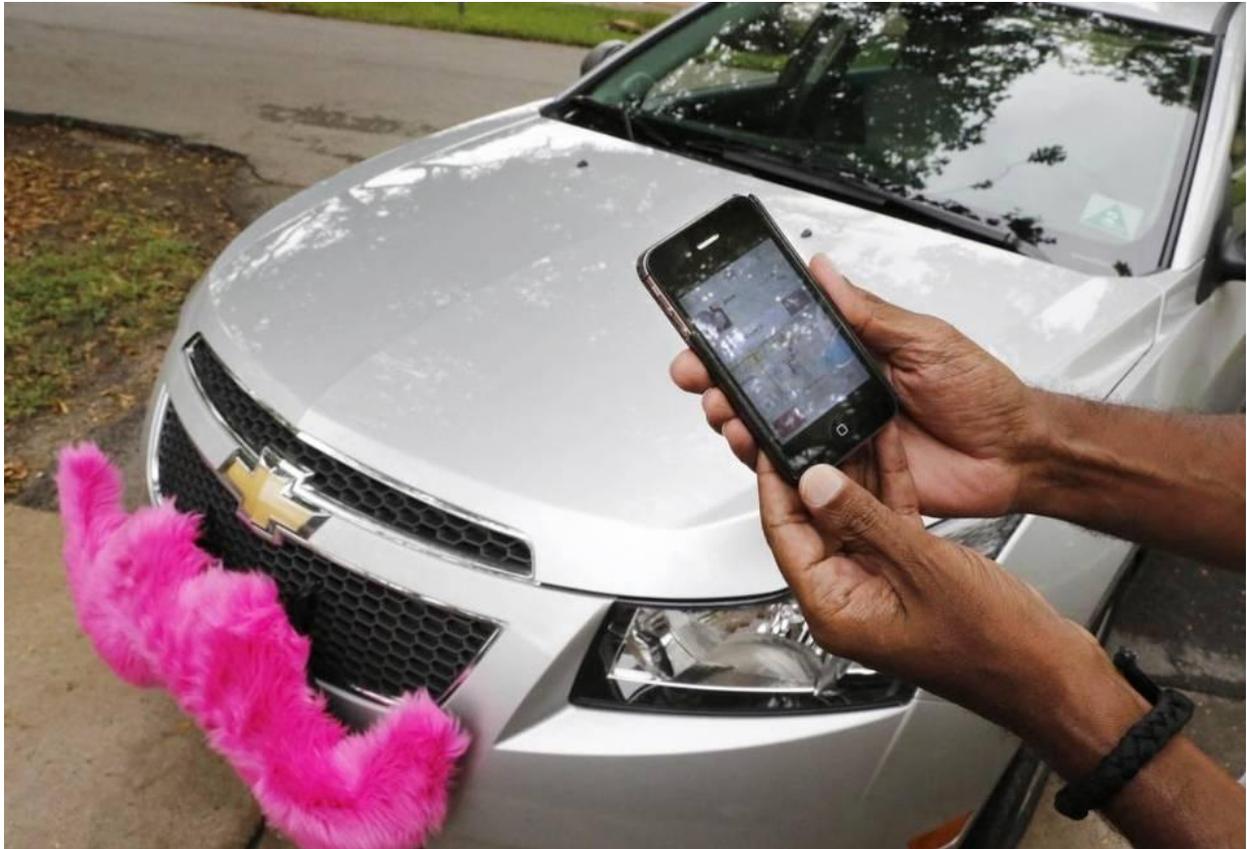


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In plan legalizing Uber, Miami-Dade mayor wants taxi apps, too



A Lyft car operating in Miami-Dade County. **Jose A. Iglesias** Jose A. Iglesias

BY DOUGLAS HANKS

Uber upended the taxi industry by letting passengers hail cars with an app, and Miami-Dade might require cabs to adopt the same technology.

A draft proposal by Mayor Carlos Gimenez would mandate “e-hailing” apps for taxis as part of a broader rewrite of county law legalizing Uber and other app-based ride services. The proposed legislation would give Uber the bulk of it what it wants: the ability to set its own rates while picking up passengers across Miami-Dade, and contract with an unlimited number of freelance drivers it would screen for criminal records and traffic violations.

“It creates a system where we can provide safeguards in terms of public safety,” said Alice Bravo, the county’s transportation director. “For the taxi industry’s perspective, we’ve eliminated some onerous requirements.”

County police would stop finger-printing and photographing taxi drivers and county regulators would lift some fees and restrictions as they legalize a competitor that already has a thriving business in Florida’s largest county. Taxi leaders are warning of grim consequences once Uber and its smaller competitor Lyft can solidify their foothold in Miami-Dade

“When you dismantle the taxi industry, who is going to pick up the people in under-served areas, and the people without credit cards?” asked Diego Feliciano, head of the South Florida Taxicab Association.

Miami-Dade’s 13-member county commission has blocked pro-Uber legislation in the past, but the Gimenez administration sees enough support now to win passage. It promises to be a significant fight. At a meeting this week, Commissioner Barbara Jordan and Chairman Jean Monestime both flashed thumbs-down when a speaker, joking about being late, mentioned he had taken Uber to County Hall.

Monestime said Thursday that he would not rush considering legislation “for political expediency.” He said Gimenez revealed in a private meeting that he was negotiating with Uber and Lyft over the thousands of citations drivers have received for violating county for-hire laws. Monestime criticized Gimenez for tacitly supporting Uber’s flouting of county laws and objected to the idea of a Wall Street darling valued at more than \$50 billion receiving a break from the local government.

“We don’t wipe out the fines for ordinary citizens,” said Monestime, who drove a cab in Miami-Dade as a college student. “Why should we encourage someone to conduct business in our county without being properly licensed?”

Gimenez’s draft legislation largely mirrors the pro-Uber ordinance that Broward County adopted in October. That came after both Uber and Lyft pulled out of the county on the heels of Broward leaders backing much stricter regulations for the ride providers. The backtrack prompted Uber and Lyft to return, leaving Miami-Dade the next big local battlefield in Florida for the popular, high-tech ride option.

The biggest sticking point for the taxi industry rests with the county-issued medallions that serve as licenses. Capped at 2,100, they’ve limited competition and, before Uber’s arrival, rose in value as more would-be operators wanted a piece of the industry. Miami-Dade law treats the medallions as property, and owners insist they deserve compensation if the county opts to change the rules and legalize competitors.

Uber customers can only use smartphones to hail and pay for their rides, and fares rise and fall throughout the day based on demand. Taxi rates are set by county rules, and mostly are summoned by passengers calling dispatch centers. To try to fend off Uber, taxi companies have tried their own apps: FlyWheel lets passengers pay by phone, while ZabCab requires direct payment to the driver.

The new rules would require all cabs to also be connected to “e-hail” technology letting passengers summon a taxi by smartphone app. Gimenez’s legislation would also shift the county from setting taxi rates to establishing a cap on those rates.

News of the legislation, obtained this week through a public-records request, comes as Lyft faces a wrongful-death lawsuit over an Oct. 31 fatal accident in Miami involving a Lyft driver and a motorcyclist. Colson Hicks Eidson, the Coral Gables firm behind the suit, said in a press release that the litigation “raises questions” about Lyft’s “ability to train and vet” drivers. A Lyft spokeswoman declined to comment, but said “our hearts go out to all involved in the tragic accident.”