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OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

**BOROUGH PRESIDENT GALE A. BREWER
TESTIMONY TO THE TAXI AND LIMOUSINE COMMISSION'S
PUBLIC HEARING ON PROPOSED RULE CHANGES
APRIL 30, 2014**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of the proposed rule changes that will dramatically increase the availability of wheelchair accessible taxis throughout the City.

In my years in the City Council, and now as the Manhattan Borough President, I have learned from my constituents that navigating the City of New York with a mobility disability is no easy task. While our entire bus fleet is now wheelchair accessible, currently just 110 of the City's 421 subway stations met the standards set by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The Access-A-Ride paratransit system provides another important transportation alternative, but the service can be unreliable and often requires long wait times.

The City's taxi system—an invaluable part of New York City's transportation fabric for most New Yorkers—could serve as an important resource for City residents who use wheelchairs. Unfortunately, as you well know, even with the 300 new accessible medallions introduced last fall, fewer than 10% of the City's 13,237 yellow taxis and green outer-borough taxis are currently wheelchair accessible. As our friends in the disability rights advocacy community have long pointed out, our City can and should do much better to ensure that those with mobility disabilities are not excluded from this important transportation option.

My staff and I have heard countless stories of how these limited transportation options have affected City residents. We've heard instances of wheelchair users being stranded for hours in inclement weather, or because their electric wheelchair broke down, and were unable to hail an accessible taxi. Think of how frustrating it is to be in this position as a wheelchair user and see one of the few accessible taxis in the City whiz by you occupied by able-bodied passengers.

Limited transportation options are even more serious, however, in an emergency. Some wheelchair users have been stranded for hours, in the middle of the night, unable to find accessible transportation to visit a loved one in the hospital during a medical emergency. Others have spoken about the difficulties they faced finding accessible transportation during major emergencies, such as Hurricane Sandy. The situation was particularly acute in the storm's aftermath when people had to evacuate to a City shelter or to the home of a friend or family members.



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For these reasons, I am supportive of the proposed rule changes before the Commission to increase the number of accessible taxis to at least 7,500 by 2020. This increase will bring New York City into compliance with the settlement from last November's class-action lawsuit, and will improve service options for the roughly 90,000 city residents who use wheelchairs, including the elderly, veterans, and children as well as tourists. Improving taxi accessibility will not only benefit these New Yorkers, but also anyone wishing to travel with a friend, family member, or colleague who uses a wheelchair. These users, too, are often frustrated by the limited number of accessible transportation options in our City, and will greatly benefit from this plan.

Increasing the accessibility of our taxi fleet is not only the right thing to do by our City's residents and visitors, it is also financially prudent. Under the federal Medicaid law, New York State is responsible for ensuring that Medicaid beneficiaries have access to needed health services. This includes the costs involved with travel to and from health care providers, known as non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT). According to a 2010 report prepared for the Medicaid Institute at United Hospital Fund by the Lewin Group, reimbursements for a roundtrip ride in a taxi or livery service costs an average of \$20 per trip in New York City. A roundtrip ride in an ambulette service, in contrast, costs \$70. However, partly due to the inaccessibility of our City's taxi fleet, approximately 90% of NEMT trips occur via ambulette services rather than through less expensive taxi or livery services. In 2009, this translated into an annual payment of over \$201 million for ambulette services, while just \$5 million was spent on taxi and livery services. Medicaid beneficiaries who use wheelchairs will obviously be more likely to use the less expensive taxi or livery service for NEMT once our fleet is more accessible.

I know there was concern surrounding the substantial cost associated with increasing the accessibility of taxis. The Greater New York Taxi Association, which as you know supports the plan, estimates that the cost of upgrading each yellow taxi and each green outer-borough taxi will be around \$14,000. The proposed 30 cent per-ride surcharge would go a long way towards helping offset the sizable cost of this upgrade for taxi drivers, while not overly burdening the City's taxi riders.

Though I am supportive of the plan before the Commission today, I also want to raise a couple of concerns that I have heard from constituents and advocates:

- **50% Accessibility:** While the proposed rule changes will dramatically increase the number of wheelchair accessible taxis in the City, a fleet that is 50% accessible is still 50% inaccessible. Though an improvement, this will translate into fewer options and longer wait times for New Yorkers with mobility disabilities compared to those without. While the plan before the Commission will make New York City a leader in taxi accessibility in our country, other cities around the globe have gone further still.



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London's entire fleet of 19,000 taxicabs, for instance, is wheelchair accessible. There is no reason why our City shouldn't strive for a similar level of comprehensiveness.

- **Dispatch Service:** I applaud the recent creation of the dispatch service that allows individuals to request accessible taxis using the 311 service. This service will become even more important, however, once our fleet offers increased options for New Yorkers in wheelchairs, and they come to rely on this transportation option more regularly. The dispatch service, therefore, should be improved and expanded upon. A central dispatch system for the green outer-borough taxis is also needed

New York is a world class city with a first rate transportation system. Unfortunately, however, New Yorkers with mobility disabilities do not have equal access to this system. However, if by 2020, we have at least 7,500 wheelchair-accessible yellow cabs and green outer-borough cabs circulating throughout New York, we will have moved closer to providing all of our City's residents with a first rate transportation system.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.