

Toronto cracks the whip at UberX drivers

Court summons are issued to app-using vehicle owners for violating limousine bylaw

DAVID RIDER
CITY HALL BUREAU CHIEF

At least 99 UberX drivers now face 198 bylaw violations as the city of Toronto fights to rein in the California-based ride-booking giant.

The city says it will keep charging private vehicle owners trying to make some extra cash by connecting with passengers through the Uber app. Cheering on the city is the traditional taxi industry, whose representatives say unlicensed “bandits” are putting passengers at risk and could bankrupt those who follow the city’s rules.

Uber, meanwhile, says 13,000-plus local UberX drivers will keep giving Torontonians safe, reliable, affordable rides.

“In August alone, Toronto UberX driver partners will complete tens of thousands of trips, helping riders reliably get to where they need to go,” Uber Canada spokeswoman Susie Heath told the Star.

Judges will ultimately decide who wins this technology-driven showdown being played out, in various forms, in cities around the world.

The local battle will soon move to the courts because, according to Tracey Cook, Toronto’s executive director of licensing, summons are now being issued to the first UberX drivers charged in the crackdown.

Those charges, issued between

February and Aug. 7, allege the vehicle owners violated Toronto’s limousine bylaw. It states that operators of non-taxi vehicles hired to transport passengers must get a city licence and submit their vehicles for inspection. Set fines for those offences, according to the city, are \$500 and \$300 respectively, with a maximum penalty of \$5,000.

While none of the UberX drivers have stood before a judge, a court ruled in June on the separate-but-related issue of whether Uber is acting as an illegal taxi brokerage when it connects licensed taxis to passengers using the popular app.

Superior Court Judge Sean Dunphy rejected the city’s request for an injunction, ruling Uber doesn’t need a licence like Beck or Royal taxi. Uber-

using drivers do not “accept” communications from passengers through the automated app, he said, and therefore don’t run afoul of Toronto’s rules as written.

The city says that ruling, however, has no impact on UberX drivers and their private vehicles.

Uber’s Heath said: “We don’t believe that the burden of enforcement should fall on individual drivers and Uber will support our driver partners fully. We will always stand behind the hardworking community of driver partners in Toronto and believe that a regulatory solution is the best path forward.”

She said the company will continue working with Mayor John Tory and city council to “establish a permanent regulatory framework for ride-

sharing in Toronto.”

Tory told reporters Thursday he is not surprised the city continues to charge UberX drivers, even as he works with the ride-sharing firm and taxi industry representatives to draft modernized rules that protect passengers and are fair for all.

“This service seemed to be operating outside of the law and obviously the regulatory officials have made decisions with respect to laying changes and they have done so and now the courts will deal with that,” the mayor said.

“That doesn’t have any bearing on the work we’re doing to try to find a regulatory solution that modernizes our regulation and takes account of new technology that I have said all along is here to stay.”

Bringing the best minds to Canada

GLOBALINK from GTI

The federal government has provided \$20 million over three years to Globalink to bring students to Canada, 64 of them to the GTA. Students come largely from India, China, Brazil, France, Mexico and Australia.

Here’s a taste of the research three of them are working on in the GTA.

Gustavo Ramirez: Designing robots to land on asteroids

Gustavo Ramirez has come to Canada for research that’s out of this world.

A space buff and computer whiz, the third-year student at Mexico’s Tecnológico de Monterrey won a summer spot on a University of Toronto aerospace engineering team that is designing robots they hope can someday land on asteroids.

The goal is to send small robots to land on some of these mineral-rich rocks and try to redirect their orbits to bring them closer to Earth so we can mine their treasures.

“People immediately think of sci-fi movies, but it’s a very serious plan; space companies see asteroids as a huge source of minerals and also resources like oxygen and hydrogen,” said Professor Reza Emami of the U of T’s Institute for Aerospace Studies. If the oxygen and hydrogen could be extracted, they could provide fuel for space craft or oxygen for astronauts without having to come back to Earth.

“A major drawback in space exploration is that the spacecraft runs out of fuel and becomes dysfunctional, so being able to refuel a spacecraft or satellite is a very critical task,” said Emami.

MITACS student Ramirez is helping develop a simulator that runs the landing part of the mission, said Emami over Skype from his research office in Sweden. To the 21-year-old, this is an opportunity to be part of something he could not have experienced back home.

“I wanted to come to Canada because I heard universities here have a lot of investment in research and we don’t have as much aerospace research in Mexico. I believe we need to stay investigating space to make new things in the world and advance our technical knowledge.”

The mission, called Redirect Asteroid, is to bring asteroids closer to Earth so they’re convenient to mine — ideally between the Earth and the moon, said Emami. While still at the conceptual phase, a mission with the United States and Europe is being planned for 2018.



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

Gustavo Ramirez, from Mexico, is helping a University of Toronto team develop robots that can help us mine asteroids.

Is it worth it? One asteroid, labelled 1986DA, has been estimated to contain 100,000 tons of platinum and 10,000 tons of gold, said PhD student Michael Bazzocchi, one of Emami’s team, “and that has been said to be worth \$5 trillion U.S.”

Yuhong Duan: Seeking shopping secrets of Baby Boomers

As baby boomers age, are retailers serving them well?

Ryerson University Professor Hong Yu fears many stores focus so much on young shoppers, they fail to consider the needs of the biggest market. It’s a dilemma Yu’s team is researching, and Chinese undergraduate Yuhong Duan has come to help through MITACS’s Globalink program.

“Nowadays the attention is often given to ‘millennials,’ and strategies have not been focusing on baby boomers or their parents, who are in their 70s and 80s,” said Yu, an associate professor in Ryerson’s Ted Rogers School of Retail Management.

“A lot of countries are facing the challenges of an aging population. Baby boomers are seen to be the most profitable group with the most discretionary money, so how do you engage better with them?” asked Yu.

He will have Duan help conduct interviews of consumers over 50 years old to see what services they want — and what they don’t.

Her research focuses on options to traditional “bricks-and-mortar” shopping, a variety of “platforms”

she said retailers call the “omni-channel” approach, with online shopping options, in-store apps, social media marketing, catalogues and websites.

What’s the best “channel” if walking to the store is no longer as easy, asked Yu? “Is it e-commerce? Telephone and delivery? A lot of European stores have (cyber) sensors that can read your shopping patterns from your smartphone and then push information targeted to your interests.”

Duan, a third-year e-commerce student at China’s Wuhan University, has been checking out stores in the Eaton Centre and along Queen St. to see which ones offer more options, and has found the smaller, independent stores are more likely to be more flexible.

“I’m interested in consumer behaviour and I can bring my experience here back to China,” said Duan.

She got a surprise the weekend she arrived — it was Pride weekend. “In China, you won’t see that. So that’s the first thing that impressed me about Canada,” Duan said.

Shreyas Prakash: Devoted to solar power

Electrical engineering student Shreyas Prakash dreams of opening up a solar-energy company at home in India, so he jumped at the chance to work with York University solar guru Jose Etcheverry, who is developing a solar-powered charger for electric cars.



NICK KOZAK FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Shreyas Prakash, from India, helps with a solar project at York University.

The third-year student at India’s National Institute of Technology has been getting hands-on Canadian experience as a MITACS intern by helping Etcheverry’s team design and build a solar-powered charging station on a campus parking lot that will track its use by electric-car owners.

“We’re trying to solve one of the biggest problems faced by humanity: greenhouse gas emissions because we use a ridiculous amount of oil per day,” said the professor, who drives an electric car himself.

His young global assistant helped place the Canadian-built solar panels on a metal frame recently to create the solar-powered charging station. It’s a kind of hands-on research that’s critical for a generation that spends

so much time in cyberspace, said Etcheverry, an associate professor in the faculty of environmental studies and co-chair of York’s Sustainable Energy Initiative.

The 21-year-old visiting student also got a taste of the political sphere when he went with Etcheverry to Woodstock in June, as the town voted to become the first municipality in the province to pledge to use only renewable energy by 2050.

“The concept of being independent, off the grid and making your own energy empowers us,” said Prakash, who wants to create a company that can install solar power in India, even in rural areas.

“This has a lot of importance, and I’m getting practical experience.”

Gear up for more Gardiner gridlock

Start of long-term roadwork will coincide with the CNE

TARA DESCHAMPS AND DAVID RIDER
STAFF REPORTERS

Just as commuters will be clogging the Gardiner on their way to the CNE, the expressway will be undergoing construction.

The city of Toronto announced Thursday that the roadwork will occur along the 800-metre stretch between Strachan Ave. and Bathurst St. starting Aug. 19.

It will leave two lanes of traffic available in each direction, while closing the others.

The rehabilitation work, expected

to be complete by Oct. 31, 2016, will affect the elevated portion of the Gardiner, which is having its deck and concrete barrier walls replaced.

On Thursday, Mayor John Tory said the closure cannot be avoided: “It’s work that’s essential to the integrity of that roadway.”

He said city officials are looking into ways to get the work done before the scheduled target.

“We are now exploring ways, with possible additional cost implications, to speed that work up and get it done sooner,” Tory said.

Extra crews helped accelerate the rehabilitation of another section, between Garrison Rd. and the CNE, at an extra cost of \$2 million.

For the construction about to start,

crews will start early and finish late and work weekends, Tory said, adding that displays will tell motorists their expected travel times on both the Gardiner and Lake Shore Blvd.

To ease further disruptions, the city will use signal timing changes to manage traffic flow on nearby streets, undertake measures to improve the response to incidents in the area and reopen the westbound ramp from Jameson Ave. to the Gardiner, which is usually closed on weekdays from 3 to 7 p.m.

This phase of Gardiner construction was originally put on hold for the Pan Am and Parapan Am Games, which wrap up Saturday — just under a week before the CNE kicks off.

“There are all kinds of events that



CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

Construction on the Gardiner is expected to drag on for more than a year.

are happening, but we tried to sequence this around minimizing the impact,” said Michael D’Andrea, the city’s executive director of engineering and construction.

He noted that other projects such as the construction on Lower Shebourne St. and the repaving of Duf-

ferin St. between Eglinton Ave. and the 401 will also pick up soon after Pan Am hiatus.

To navigate the construction, D’Andrea recommended “carpooling, public transit, and maybe one of the apps that is available to decide on an optimal travel route into the city.”