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## Philly's Pedicabs Seek Stadium Routes

By Aaron Kase

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Photo by Chariots of Philly

Nasty winds and frigid temperatures might make the prospect of an open-air bike taxi ride sound like torture instead of a fun and eco-friendly way to get around the city, but operators have big plans for next year. On the road since late May, Philly's nascent pedicab industry is made up of two companies with modest operations—Velo-Park with six vehicles, and Chariots of Philly with 10—and a lone independent operator. After more than six months of providing tours or a quick way home from the bar, the drivers are huddling up for the winter and focusing their efforts on expanding their businesses in the spring.

The first step in expansion came in the form of a City Council bill, passed last week, which allows pedicab operators to have driver's licenses from states other than Pennsylvania. The bill also permits bikes with electric assists. "It's an enormous opportunity for entrepreneurs who care about sustainability," says Councilwoman Blondell Reynolds Brown, who sponsored the bill and was instrumental in pushing through last year's legislation that allowed pedicabs to operate on city streets in the first place. "We're really excited about it growing."

The idea of the bill is to make the profession accessible to a wider pool of drivers, including college students from out of state as well as older people who might have trouble pedaling passengers around without an electric assist.

"It opens it up so you don't have to be the strongest driver in the world," says Ronn Ash, owner of Velo-Park, who worked previously as general manager of the Chamounix hostel in Fairmount Park.

However, before the pedicab companies can support more drivers, they need to build a larger customer base and find more reliably profitable beats. Each company has been working on its niche—Velo-Park

has focused on giving tours of historic parts of the city, while Chariots is all about ferrying bar-goers back and forth through popular neighborhoods like Northern Liberties and Old City.

Drivers from both companies agree that if pedicabs are to really take root and become a durable part of the transportation matrix in the city, they need to get the novel form of transportation down to the sports stadiums in South Philly. "It's really important that we have access to sports complexes," Ash says. "For pedicab companies in other cities, that's their bread and butter."

"It's essential," says Chariots of Philly co-owner Ben Dambman. "We really want to have the stadiums open up so people know anywhere in Philadelphia they can get a bike cab."

With a large pool of prospective customers all needing to move in a short period of time, baseball games and other sports are a critical part of pedicab business models in other cities. "Stadium work is pretty important," says Danny Cochrane, manager of National Pedicabs in Washington, D.C., since 2008. "It's one of the things that we looked into when we started expanding." Before moving to D.C., Cochrane worked for the same company in Boston, where he says bike taxis became an essential component of sporting events. "After working Red Sox games for several games, it starts to become part of the experience," he says. "It becomes a fun way to get to the game. You start to get repeat riders."

Cochrane says his company has considered expanding into Philadelphia but has held back due to the city's restrictions. "If you couldn't ride around the stadium you wouldn't want to ride pedicabs in Philly," he says.

Pedicabs are currently permitted in bike lanes citywide, but the bike-lane network in South Philly isn't extensive enough to provide useful routes to get sports fans to SEPTA stations or to other downtown locations. Otherwise, most streets south of Oregon Avenue are prohibited to bikers pulling passengers behind them.

The pedicabs have no plans to ride on Broad Street, Dambman says, which is a state highway and would be off limits anyway. But shuttling people from the stadiums to the Pattison Avenue subway stop would be a quick, money-making route. Plus, side streets east of Broad could be used to take passengers further up in South Philly or all the way to Center City.

If they are to successfully access the stadium crowds, the pedicab companies have a number of obstacles to overcome. The taxis are regulated by the Streets Department, which says all stakeholders must be on board first if it is to open up new routes. "It would require the stadiums and police to buy into it," says Charles Denny, assistant chief engineer for the Streets Department.

Pedicab operators would also have to convince the residents of South Philly neighborhoods that they can safely co-exist with normal street traffic, especially the crush of cars pouring out of the sports complex after games. That means also convincing civic groups and the Sports Complex Special Services District (SCSSD), which have so far exhibited skepticism about the idea that pedicabs can safely join the mass of night-time foot and vehicle traffic in the neighborhood.

"This topic raises a number of concerns and questions that would have to be answered by the City Streets Department and Police Department before SCSSD could offer an opinion," writes SCSSD Executive Director Shawn Jalosinski in an email. "Generally speaking, SCSSD supports alternative transportation modes to ease congestion in the Sports Complex area, but I do not see how bike taxis could add value or safely operate in the congestion of traffic and pedestrian surges before and after events."

Barbara Capozzi, president of the Packer Park Civic Association, expresses concerns, specifically about all the drunk people leaving the games. “Our traffic is SO HORRENDOUS here at times, that we feared pedicabs mixed with alcohol-fueled fans might be a very bad mix,” Capozzi writes in an email. She says that she’s observed pedicabs working well in New York City, but Philly could be a different story. “Everyone here fears that our Eagles fans (post-game) may make NYC taxidriviers look tame by comparison,” she writes.

The taxi drivers plan to pitch their cause to the civics and SCSSD soon, laying out exactly where they want to go and how they can mitigate any traffic concerns. “We’re planning to go down and shoot a video, how it would work, what streets it would be on, how they can get around without causing problems,” Dambman says. “We really need to have our case prepared well.”

“It’s got to be done right, with traffic lanes, lights and hours of operation,” says Ash. “Without regulation, it can get out of hand and people can get hurt.”

Ultimately, the goal is for bike taxis to be a visible and normal sight around the stadiums and other popular areas of the city, so people start thinking about them as a viable form of transport instead of a novelty. “You’re gonna be a lot more likely to ride in one when you see someone else doing it,” Dambman says. “We want to be part of the transportation network throughout the city.”

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