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Service Standards For Taxi Operators

New rules 'won't ease cab woes'

Commuters, industry observers fear fare hikes & say rules unlikely to solve grouse of not being able to get cab when needed.

By [Shahida Ariff and Grace Chua](#)

YOU cannot get a cab when you need one.

It is a familiar complaint and one that commuters now believe is not likely to be addressed by the Land Transport Authority's (LTA) plan to introduce eight new service standards for operators from June.

Operators who do not meet the new standards - which include a wait of no more than five minutes for a taxi to be found through a phone booking, nine out of 10 times - will be fined up to \$100,000 for each contravention. They could even lose their licences.

It looks good on paper, but some commuters, MPs and industry observers are not convinced it will make a difference when trying to catch a cab at 11.45 pm.

More worrying is that the new regulations, which come with a monthly \$25 licence fee per taxi for operators, will push up fares - a situation which has left commuters asking if the deregulated taxi industry really needs yet another set of rules.

LTA already acts against drivers for offences like rudeness, refusing to pick up passengers without a valid excuse and overcharging.

Last year, the regulator disciplined about 2,200 cabbies, from counselling to revoking their vocational licences.

And a new points-based system to discipline drivers is being finalised by the LTA, a spokesman told The Straits Times.

This is on top of the cab companies' own sets of regulations, the breaking of which can see cabbies being fined, sent for counselling and re-training, or, in the worst cases, being sacked.

Comfort sacked more than 200 drivers last year.

So, with taxi companies and the regulator already having several sets of rules in place, Mr Ong Kian Min, deputy chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee (Transport), does not see a need for new guidelines to improve standards.

'The companies have to focus on training the older crop of drivers, because these are the ones who need to develop the right mindset,' said Mr Ong, who is also an MP for Tampines.

But the regulator believes the rules will make a difference, even in dealing with the No 1 commuter grouse of not being able to get a cab when you need one.

LTA explained that with the new rules comes a plan to allow more cab companies to operate.

Also, the existing players are reviewing their midnight fare structure to introduce the midnight surcharge gradually, a possible solution to the problem of cabs disappearing just before midnight.

And far from fares going up, competition may even lead to lower fares, LTA argues.

But again, industry observers are doubtful.

Transport analyst John Casey from DBS Vickers said that with the 'pretty draconian start-up cost, there will be a limited number of potential players in the business'.

Mr Ang Mong Seng, a member of the GPC (Transport) and MP for Hong Kah, wonders if there really is a demand for more taxis.

He said: 'With a ratio of 4.8 taxis per 1,000 people, the market is very small.'

There are already about 19,000 cabs on the roads. Adding more is bad news for current cabbies.

Said Mr Abdul Halil Abdul Karim, 57: 'We already have problems picking up passengers. Passengers' waiting time may be cut if there are more taxis during peak hours, but what about non-peak hours? There will be lots of empty cabs then.'

On the issue of poor service standards, another cabby, Ms Patsy Ho, 36, said that commuters got what they deserved.

'There are impatient passengers who simply stop any available taxi that passes by even after they've made a booking with us. But if we don't pick them up, we get penalised.'