UBER CHAOS IN SOUTH FLORIDA: MIAMI WORST, WITH $2.7 MILLION IN FINES

News / Airports / Routes

Aug. 29--MIAMI -- The lanky man pounded the sidewalk outside Concourse J at Miami International Airport as cars pulled up, suitcases came out and people walked inside to jet off to an exotic foreign locale.

Standing in the bright sunlight amid the heat and car exhaust, and in the noise of ascending big birds, the man wore blue work pants, a water bottle and 2-way radio in the back pocket. He held in his left hand a fat municipal citations book.

He works for the airport. And he was trolling for Uber.

Specifically, for Uber drivers dropping off or picking up.

For months, the wildly popular freelance vehicle-for-hire business has sparred with Broward and Palm Beach counties over the rules in which it operates. It left Broward at the end of July, and it's set to leave Palm Beach at the end of September if it doesn't get what it thinks is fair.

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But in Miami-Dade County, Uber is flat-out illegal.

In the past year, through July 30, drivers there collectively have been fined a staggering $2.7 million.

Many politicians and tourism folks say the three South Florida counties constitute a single entity for the millions of people who live, work and vacation in it.

But that's not the case when it comes to Uber. People using the freelance ride service, or one of its competitors, face a Balkanized mess when they try to travel from Boca Raton to the Fort Lauderdale airport, for from Jupiter to a Marlins game, or from North Miami to CityPlace in West Palm Beach.

While many local officials say uniform rules for the entire state would be the best solution, legislation to regulate the industry stalled this spring and it won't get done statewide before next year.

So the three South Florida counties continue their piecemeal regulation.

The Broward County Commission is scheduled to take a preliminary vote on its latest set of proposed rules on Tuesday and a final vote Sept. 17. In Palm Beach County, the newest proposal goes to a vote Sept. 22. Similar but not exactly the same, the proposals both are intended to keep Uber operating in the two counties.

But Miami-Dade County hasn't even had its first formal discussion on rules. County Mayor Carlos A. Gimenez supports setting rules but with the county embroiled in the latest of a long legacy of budget crisis, Miami-Dade spokesman Michael Hernandez said in July that the Uber mess "certainly won't be resolved before the fall."

Uber argues that Miami-Dade rules don't specifically address ride-sharing, so while they don't directly permit it, they don't outlaw it either.

That hasn't stopped the county, however, from writing tickets and even impounding cars when they catch Uber drivers in the act.

For more than a year, officers from the county department that monitors taxis and other "vehicles for hire," along regular Metro-Dade police officers, have been cracking down. Besides watching the pickup traffic at Miami International Airport, county agents also sometimes pose as riders.

Between May 2014 and July 30 of this year, the county issued tickets to more than 1,300 drivers. Of the 2,774 tickets issued, 2,436, or nearly 9 in 10, are under appeal.

The tickets constitute an administrative fine rather than a criminal charge, but if they're not paid, the county can turn them over to their collections folks, who can go so far as to place liens on drivers' property.

On top of that, if a police officer catches an Uber driver, the officer can seize the driver's car, the county said. It said 20 cars currently are impounded.

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More than half the tickets issued in Miami-Dade were written at Miami International. Airports have been the prime battleground nationwide, and Miami International is one of the world's busiest airports, with many of the 14 million tourists visiting the county each year passing through it.

Authorities watch for a cellphone on the dashboard showing the Uber logo, or for a driver whose body language suggest he's not a relative or friend.

The airport agent who was on the lookout Thursday afternoon wouldn't say if he'd ticketed anyone that day. Another agent, who also did not want to be identified, said he's seen a drop in recent weeks as Uber drivers start to wise up.

He said they have riders sit in the front seat and "give them (the drivers) a kiss and a hug."

Uber won't say if it's paying the Miami-Dade fines. Drivers have told some law enforcement officials they've received emails from Uber suggesting it will pay. Others have said they tried to contact Uber when they were cited and still are waiting.

Uber may consider the tickets, even $2.7 million's worth, a cost of doing business. A July Wall Street Journal report put the outfit's value at $50 billion.

Uber has been more active in fighting Broward and Palm Beach counties' efforts to force its drivers to submit to fingerprint-based, government done "Level II" background checks. Uber says they unnecessarily expose drivers' names to the public. But taxi leaders say it's because Uber drivers don't want their insurers to know they're driving for Uber, for fear they'd be dropped or their rates jacked.

Florida lawmakers, meanwhile, are feeling the heat to do their part to keep the app-based industry in the state.

Last Month, Tom Feeney, head of the non-profit business advocacy group Associated Industries of Florida, called for the legislature to pass a law for the entire state. Bills stalled last year in both houses.

State Rep. Dave Kerner, D-Lake Worth, for whom the January session will be his last, said counties are pleading with the state to act.

"It is really important that we step up to the plate and pass a bill this year," said Kerner, who also said he has used Uber. He worried that a lack of action in Tallahassee could drive Uber and its counterparts out of Florida, which he said would not be good for the state's lucrative tourism industry.

Sen. Joseph Abruzzo, D-Wellington, said he understands how tourists can be confused from city to city.

"I would be confused," he said.

As a member of the Senate's Committee on Regulated Industries, which regulates for-hire vehicles, Abruzzo expects to see such legislation in 2016.

"It would be irresponsible if we did not pass something," he said.

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