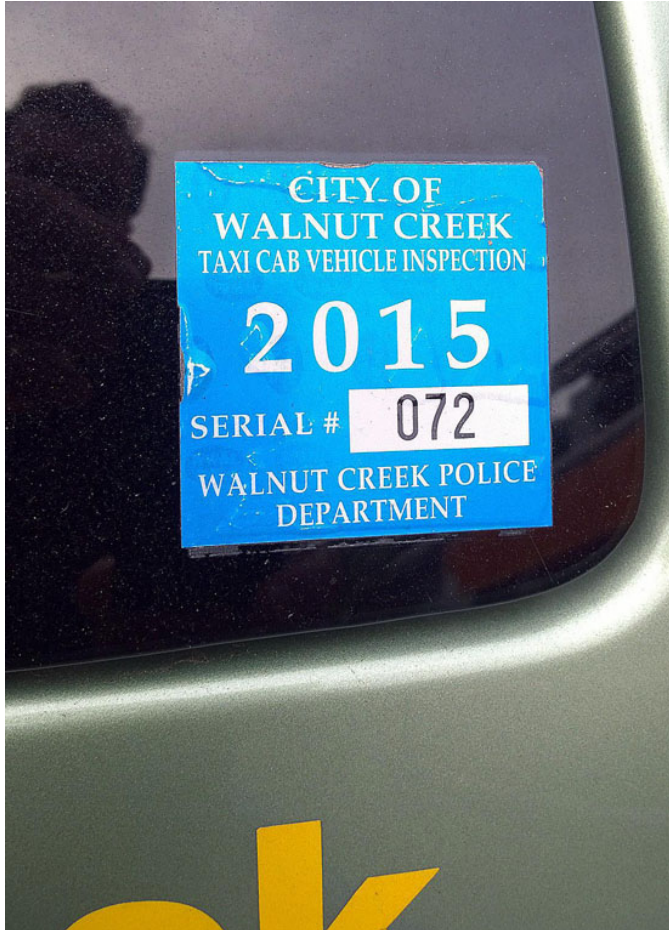


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Lamorinda's Taxi War

By Sophie Braccini



This blue window sticker is displayed on taxis that have been inspected by the City of Walnut Creek. Photo provided

Lamorinda taxi companies say they are alarmed; they claim that unlicensed competition from outside of Lamorinda floods the Lafayette and Orinda BART stations. The cause of their concern is that Lamorinda cities do not require background checks on companies and drivers, as opposed to cities such as Walnut Creek, which has taxi permit licensing requirements.

"I have been working for 8 years providing public transportation for Lamorinda residents/[BART] commuters and I see drivers and taxis without permits, which require not just background checks but drug and alcohol checks as well, operating at [BART] stations located in Lafayette and Orinda that do not require permits," wrote Orinda Taxi owner Julian Jurisevic in an open letter. He adds that his company and drivers are all licensed with the City of Walnut Creek.

Two other local taxi companies, Taxi Bleu and Moraga Taxi, also claim that their company and drivers are licensed, or in the process of being licensed, with Walnut Creek police - most of Lamorinda's taxis also operate in that city so they must have permits.

"The way you can tell if a taxi has been inspected by Walnut Creek police is that it will have a blue sticker that says 2015 in the back window," explained Walnut Creek police officer Sandy Mulligan. And the operator should have a Walnut Creek taxi driver permit with his picture on it, which indicates that there has been a background

check and an inspection. Mulligan confirmed that, to the best of her knowledge, all of Orinda Taxi's drivers are licensed with them; she also thinks that she's seen most of Taxi Bleu's drivers. She said Moraga Taxi, the latest addition to the local taxi market, has paid for a business license but has not yet had any inspections done.

Mulligan adds that many taxi companies located outside her city require their drivers to be certified by Walnut Creek. The process includes fingerprinting, a background questionnaire including criminal record, and a test for controlled substances. The police chief may investigate any applicant, at his discretion. The permit has to be re-submitted yearly.

Orinda police chief Mark Nagel said he supports background checks and licensing of that industry, "for the mere fact of knowing who people are and what they are doing," he said, adding that Orinda can expect more to come on this issue.

"Lafayette discussed in 2012 the possibility of a Lafayette taxi permit," said transportation planner Leah Greenblat. Staff looked at existing regulations, talked with the city attorney and concluded that even if Lafayette took advantage of an existing process, the city did not have the staff to enforce a regulation; neither does Moraga, according to police chief Robert Priebe.

Although it is customary to take the first taxi in line at a taxi stand, BART police confirmed that no one is required to do so. Concerned customers who prefer to ride in a licensed cab can look

for the blue sticker and ask to see a permit. Potential passengers may also ask how many hours the driver has been on duty that day - a recent study conducted by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found that drowsy drivers are involved in an estimated 12.5 percent of fatal crashes.

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