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## **Taxicab Absurdity**

**by Scott Mcpherson**

When one hears words such as “crackdown” and “sting” and “bust” the image that comes to mind is that of daring police officers engaged in some colossal operation that nets really bad people doing really bad things.

At least, that’s the image that *ought* to come to mind.

In the charming little city of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, there are taxicab companies operating that are not licensed by the city to pick up passengers within city limits and drop them off there — but that are nonetheless — brace yourself — doing exactly that.

The horror!

According to a November 30 story in the weekly *Portsmouth Times*,

Taxis that both pick up and drop off a passenger within city limits have to be licensed with the city. If a cab company without a Portsmouth license picks up a passenger outside of city limits and brings them into Portsmouth, or vice versa, that is fine.

You’re forgiven if you had to read that twice because, frankly, it’s absurd, and trying to understand absurd things can be confusing.

Interviewed by the paper, Lt. Rodney McQuate said the city’s licensing ordinance is for safety concerns (of course) because the city does a background check (ahhhh, that great panacea — the background check) as part of its licensing process, making sure that operators’ licenses are valid and that drivers are clear of any felony convictions and have had no more than three violations within three years. (He didn’t mention revenue derived from such licensing regimes: a minimum of \$150 per taxi and driver goes to the city, with more fees going to the state — and bureaucratic hurdles the size of the White Mountains.)

Forget that cab drivers aren’t exactly Public Enemy Number 1. They’re actually more likely to be the *victim* than the perpetrator of a crime, or so a May 2000 OSHA press release claimed: cabbies are 60 *times* more likely to be murdered on the job than other workers and “victim to

more violent assaults ... than any other occupation with the exception of police ... and private security guards.” (Ten tips were offered to increase their safety. To no one’s surprise, a background check on *drivers* wasn’t among them.)

Nevertheless, we should all be bracing ourselves for an outbreak of violent and irresponsible taxi operators bent on victimizing their unwitting customers — save for the benevolent and timely intervention of the Portsmouth city government!

I’ll bet you feel safer already.

Shielding us from this menace, “The Police Department is continuing its crackdown” on these unlicensed (shudder) taxis; it carries out “periodic stings”; and once even “busted” the “now defunct” Lighthouse Taxi service in 2005 “for picking up a passenger at a local hotel and taking the person to the airport.” (No mention of how licensing ordinances such as this one — a protectionist racket if ever there was one — actually contribute to a company’s becoming “defunct.”)

But the danger persists. The Kittery Cab Co., which operates from across the Piscataqua River in Kittery, Maine, has been spotted recently “picking up people in Portsmouth and dropping them off somewhere else in the city. ‘That’s a violation of city ordinance,’ Officer McQuate said.”

Call out the National Guard!

The story continues, “McQuate added that police have not gotten as many complaints on this matter” as they used to. More likely, no one but some busybody has ever complained. Customers surely aren’t complaining about having more options when they need a lift somewhere. And if complaints are down, why the crackdown?

Worse, the Portsmouth Police Department “is still continuing to monitor the issue and the department informs the officers on the street” because “officers have followed some of these cabs before but trying to catch the operator in the act is the difficult part.”

Murderers, rapists, burglars, and muggers beware: while engaging in your craft, the local police department is chasing rogue taxicabs!

This issue highlights the Nanny State at its worst. Do we deserve to be treated like children, or can we be trusted to discern for ourselves whether or not the cab that answers our call is one we wish to ride in?

If it’s necessary to keep customers safe, it should apply to *any* taxi company operating within the city limits for *any* reason — not just arbitrarily to those serving customers going from point A to point B within Portsmouth. Are customers coming from or traveling to locations outside the city any less deserving of the city council’s wisdom?

But it’s better to not give our babysitters any more ideas.

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