



Cameras in taxis to be mandatory in Waterloo after string of sexual assaults

By Staff Metroland News Service



Torstar News ServiceA taxi's roof light is seen in this file photo.

WATERLOO REGION — All taxis in Waterloo Region will soon have surveillance cameras in place after a string of sexual assault charges against drivers.

Peter Neufeld, president of the Waterloo Region Taxi Association and Waterloo Taxi, said the move is to increase passenger safety and protect drivers.

“In the very near future, it’s going to be mandatory that all cars have forward and inward-facing cameras,” Neufeld said. “It will be video and audio and the cars will have a sticker on the dash letting the passengers know.

“It’s for everybody’s safety — drivers, passengers.”

Some local cabs are already equipped with cameras, but it isn’t required by either the Region of Waterloo, which regulates the industry, or the taxi association which is made up of local taxi drivers and licence owners.

On the heels of news that a sixth cabbie was charged with sexual assault in two years, Neufeld said the association will make cameras mandatory. He also noted the cameras will protect taxi drivers, too. There’s no set time frame for the change, but the recent incidents will put a bit of a rush on things, Neufeld said.

He estimates Waterloo Taxi will spend up to \$130,000 to equip its cars.

Angelo Apfelbaum, the region's manager of licensing and enforcement, estimated at least 50 per cent of local cabs are equipped with cameras. He said they serve as deterrents and suggested the association put them in place.

"Yes, camera systems are definitely deterrents," Apfelbaum said. "It's one of the topics that I have spoken with at length to the taxi union about."

All taxis are already wired with global positioning systems for tracking. The GPS tracking allows the company to know where its drivers have been, how fast they were driving, how long stops were and more. A small taxi company in New Hamburg is the only one without GPS, Neufeld said.

Since February 2013, six drivers have either been charged with or are before the courts on sexual assault charges.

One driver was convicted and will be in court for sentencing later this week, two were acquitted, one agreed to a peace bond when the charges were dismissed, and a fifth is still before the courts. The sixth was charged Friday.

The region regulates the local taxi industry. Only it can give licences and take them away.

Apfelbaum said there are no plans to legislate that all cabs have cameras because of the cost involved to the industry.

"It's better to have voluntary compliance," Apfelbaum said.

There are currently 547 licensed taxi drivers operating for five companies in the townships and cities. There are 332 licence owners. Some drive, some contract other drivers to operate their taxi and some do both.

Neufeld said there has been resistance from drivers to the cameras. He hopes the company covering costs will solve that and drivers will see their value.

"These guys are worried also," Neufeld said. "I'm not saying that (the charges are) frivolous complaints because they're not. I take every one of them seriously and they have to be addressed and these guys realize that as easy as it is for somebody to do something bad, it's also easy for someone to accuse someone if they weren't happy."

The cameras will also help with fare disputes or collisions, he said.

The region had some difficulty keeping track of the charged drivers.

In recent weeks, a new communication protocol was set up with Waterloo Regional Police after the Record reported one driver kept driving after being charged with sexual assault. Both police and the region believed the Golden Triangle Taxi driver had been taken off the road.

A few weeks later, the region learned a second cabbie slipped through the cracks and had also been charged without the region's knowledge. He did not continue driving.

Police now inform the region of investigations underway and any resulting charges. Standard protocol is for a driver to be de-authorized from driving a cab by the taxi company until charges are dealt with in court.