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Uber exerts influence on Pendleton taxi debate

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — The future of ride-hail services in Pendleton now is in the hands of city attorney Nancy Kerns.

After ride-hail giant Uber nixed a proposed ordinance that would have integrated ride-hails into Pendleton, Kerns used a Tuesday, April 5, city council meeting to ask for guidance as she prepares to reengage Uber in negotiations.

The city previously was negotiating with Elite Taxi, the city's only taxi service, and a group of residents who aspired to drive for Uber. After meeting with the two sides, the city emerged with a framework that would have allowed, on a trial basis, ride-hails such as Uber to operate during the evening hours while Elite mainly operated during the day. While the local ride-hail



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Two Elite Taxi vehicles await fares Tuesday, April 5, 2022, at 332 S.E. Dorion Ave., Pendleton. City attorney Nancy Kerns is working on a proposal for a pilot project to allow Uber to operate in Pendleton.

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drivers weren't happy with the deal, staff prepared to have the city council vote on the issue at the April 5 meeting.

But sometime before the meeting, Uber contacted the city to let staff know it objected to the proposed ordinance.

"They are not open to the possibility of working or operating their business on a limited-hours basis," she said. "I think it's something they just don't do. We're not a big enough component that they would consider doing it for us."

Kerns said she wanted to write a new ordinance with Uber's input and was confident she could negotiate with the corporation herself, but wanted guidance from the

council first. She added the new ordinance would allow Uber, and other ride-hail services including Lyft, to operate in the city 24-hours per day as a part of a pilot program.

Mayor John Turner recounted the stakes of the issue. While Elite may hold the status as the only taxi service in town, it also fills a crucial role in the city's public transportation services, holding a contract to operate transportation programs for senior, disabled and low-income residents. The pilot program would allow the city to study whether Elite could coexist with ride-hails and generate enough revenue to continue fulfilling its contractual obligation to the city.

"Right now, Uber has no responsibilities to the city," Turner said. "But Elite Taxi does."

There was no public hearing attached to the coun-

cil discussion, but audience members used the public comment section of the meeting to voice their views on the issue. Some speakers said they used the city's taxi ticket program, which was integral for them to get to medical appointments. Others connected to the local tourism industry said Pendleton should allow Uber and other ride-hailing services because visitors increasingly expected them.

Kerns said she expected to introduce the new ordinance at the city council's next meeting on April 19. She also intended to request the council hold a first reading and public hearing on the same night, allowing the council to pass the ordinance immediately.

The council requested Kerns set the length of the trial period at five months, which would extend the pilot program past the Round-Up.

While the council took no

action, it did vote on several other issues.

- The council unanimously voted to raise water rates, sewer rates and the street utility fee by 3.3%. Public Works Director Bob Patterson said the utility rates and fees are usually tied to a price index, but the high rate of inflation meant if the council didn't take action, the rates were set to rise by 6.7%. A couple of residents spoke against the rate increase, arguing that Pendleton's utility rates already were too high and didn't compare favorably with other communities in the region.

- The council also unanimously agreed to spend \$33,442 to expand the water line to the future Pendleton Children's Center, 510 S.W. 10th St. The move will allow the nonprofit child care center to install fire suppression sprinklers at the old Pendleton senior center ahead of its planned opening in the fall.