



Making Taxis More Accessible: Norfolk, VA

Safe-Ride Program Also Helps Clear Streets at Bar Closing

As Downtown Norfolk's Granby Street grew into a regional destination for dining and entertainment, more people stayed out later to enjoy the area's nightlife. Downtown Norfolk Council (DNC) wished to discourage driving while intoxicated. In assessing transportation alternatives, they found the best option to accomplish this goal was to make taxis more accessible. Taxi companies, police, parking enforcement and nightlife businesses worked to identify barriers and promote and implement the "Don't Drive, Catch a Ride" campaign.

Problem Statement

Norfolk, VA is located in the heart of the region commonly referred to as Hampton Roads. Over a quarter million residents live in more than a hundred neighborhoods extending as far as a 35-minute drive.

Downtown Norfolk serves as the region's center for commerce, with shopping and arts on Granby Street, the area's premier destination for dining and entertainment.

Prior to implementing the taxi stand, Downtown Norfolk had very limited public transportation and less than robust service from taxi companies. In general, taxi companies are primarily vehicle leasing companies, whose independent contractor drivers make their own decisions as to where they choose to pick up fares. With no incentive and multiple barriers, Norfolk's taxi drivers were not motivated to service the District, much less at night when Granby street was log-jammed with cars and pedestrians, trying to exit the District.

Reports of taxi waits extending beyond 90 minutes were common. As a result, patrons at risk of alcohol impairment had few alternatives but to drive their own vehicle.

Stakeholders

- **Downtown Norfolk Council, a Business Improvement District**, facilitated the convening of stakeholders, developed and printed marketing materials.
- **Taxi Companies** identified driver and logistical barriers, provided awareness and incentive for their drivers.
- **DNC's Responsible Hospitality Committee** assisted with promotion.

- **City of Norfolk: Public Works Department** manages public right-of-way, so they had to approve. Public Works assisted in identifying locations and posting signage.
- **City of Norfolk Parking Division** provided the parking spaces where the taxi stands were located. After implementation, they continued to remove the A-Frame signs in the mornings.
- **Norfolk Police Department** was part of the early discussion. They also provide enforcement of the taxi zone.
- **Department of Utilities** approved using their parking lot at night for locating two other stands.
- **DNC's Public Safety Ambassadors** placed the taxi stand A-frame signs at the zone's curb at 6pm. They also distributed brochures, as well as verbally notifying and directing patrons to the taxi stands.
- **Restaurant & Bar Owners** made their staff aware of the program to promote to patrons.

Process

In Fall 2005, Downtown Norfolk Council convened the owners of the area's taxi companies to facilitate a solution to ineffective taxi service for nighttime District patrons. A two-way education led to better understanding by all parties.

The District explained how visitors who wanted taxi rides would give up after long waits. These "no shows", it turned out, further entrenched taxi drivers into their belief that servicing the District was not worth the trouble.

The taxi companies explained to the rest of the stakeholders that their drivers were challenged to work within the District because of difficulty in accessing patrons. Through discussion of the situation, two barriers were identified. Cabs were forbidden by law to "cruise" for fares in the entertainment district, yet there was no convenient or legal place to wait for customers either.

The City took on the task of identifying two initial areas near the late-night activity to be designated as "taxis only." The following criteria were used to decide on taxi stand locations: A well-lit area visible from Granby Street, but not on Granby Street. After all, the idea was to clear Granby Street.

The locations were designated taxi stands from 6:00pm to 6:00am, so as not to interfere with daytime parking demands.

Because there was already a taxi stand outside of a Downtown hotel and at Waterside located on the waterside fringe of downtown, legislation was already in place. An ordinance didn't need to be created and approved by City Council. This taxi zones initiative was presented to City Council for their awareness and input. They had concerns about cars being towed and wanted to assure there was a response in place. Otherwise, they wholeheartedly signed off, pleased with the public/private partnership that brought the initiative to life.

The program was activated in January 2006. Taxi Companies notified their drivers of the two taxi stands and made the two locations a GPS setting in their cars to encourage drivers to use the locations.

Public Works designed and posted street post-style signs and A-Frame signs were created to place at curbs to draw attention to the taxis stands. Responsibility for placement of the A-frame signs was assigned to Downtown Norfolk Council's Public Safety Ambassadors and pick up to City of Norfolk's Parking Staff.

DNC used their e-mail list to notify downtown businesses and residents. Their Ambassadors were assigned to heavily patrol the taxi stands and intercept those who tried to park there to help them avoid being cited. Police enforced the "No Parking in Taxi Zone" restriction and facilitated the ticketing and towing of cars that did not obey the signs. Both efforts raised awareness of the taxi stands, and after the first few weeks, ticketing and towing dropped off and now only occurs intermittently.

Downtown Norfolk Council designed and produced a business card-sized brochure that identifies all the downtown taxi stands and phone numbers of all the taxi companies in the Hampton Road region. The brochures are a size that can be easily kept in someone's wallet.

DNC's Responsible Hospitality Committee mobilized to distribute the brochures to bar and restaurant proprietors, who in turn educated their staff to distribute them to anyone needing assistance. The Committee reports that door security regularly carry the "Don't Drive, Take a Ride" cards in their pockets.

Bars are calling for taxis more frequently because the response time has improved drastically. RHI Leadership Summit Case Study - 17 April 4, 2008 This effort took three months to implement.

Outcome

- Two centralized, publicized taxi stands initiated the project; there are now five.
- Consumer awareness about safe rides home.
- Removal of barriers to cab drivers preventing taxis from servicing the area.
- Driver awareness of incentives and barrier removal.
- Bar and restaurant staff awareness and promotion increased.
- 5,000 promotional cards distributed in one year.
- Increased taxi usage.
- No parking revenue loss because the taxi zone is only official after 6pm when parking meters are off.
- More efficient clearing of District at closing time. "We're managing the process rather than the process managing us."
- Less pedestrians and cars in the street at closing.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The biggest challenge was in bringing the right stakeholders to the table and getting them to understand the importance of their participation in crafting a solution.

An on-going challenge is the ever-changing employee pool in both the taxi and hospitality industry. There is the need for constant education of staff for the venues and taxi companies, as well as security stakeholders.

DNC had in place relationships with the key stakeholders, including the largest cab company, which proved to be a major benefit in overcoming the challenges identified. They believe the success of this process highlights the value of leveraging existing relationships.

Jurisdiction

District, City, Region

Funding

DNC paid for the design and printing of Taxi Zone signs, posters and the wallet-sized promotional brochure.

Spin-off Projects

While working to improve taxi service, a consumer barrier was recognized spurring a tie-in project that was implemented simultaneously and as a component of "Don't Drive, Catch a Ride." It was determined that those who wished to take a taxi home due to potential impairment often decided to take their own car because they didn't want to incur extra expense in overnight parking fees and/or perceived a challenge to get their car back the next day. Downtown Norfolk Council initiated a partnership between City Parking and Taxi Companies that addressed this barrier, and then implemented it in conjunction with the taxi stand awareness.

Start Date: 9/1/2005 - 5/19/2008

Contact

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