

Cabbie picks up hybrid trend; Independent operator city's 1st to jump into environmentally friendly vehicle -- and he loves it

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With concerns about global warming on the rise, Fred Fugiel's new taxi is turning the longtime Chicago cabbie into a bit of a celebrity.

Fugiel started humming around the city last month in a fuel-sipping Toyota Prius, the first hybrid vehicle among Chicago's 6,300 taxis. His old 2001 Chevy Impala averaged a measly 19 miles to the gallon, less than half what his white-and-red Prius hatchback boasts in city driving. The Impala also churned out twice as much heat-trapping pollution.

"This car is a cult hero," Fugiel, an independent operator who's been driving cabs in Chicago for 40 years, said during a spin around the River North neighborhood. "It's going to save me a ton on gas. Plus people keep stopping on the street to give me the thumbs up."

Cities across the nation are cleaning up their taxi fleets to help reduce air pollution and fight climate change. But although Mayor Richard Daley pledges to make Chicago the greenest city in the U.S., environmentally friendly cabs like Fugiel's remain novelties for now.

So far, Fugiel has been joined on the streets by just one other hybrid taxi.

As of Sunday, city rules will require each of Chicago's 12 large cab fleets to operate at least one hybrid or alternative-fuel taxi. New York City, by contrast, already has 375 hybrid taxis and is switching all of its 13,000 cabs to more fuel-efficient models by 2012. Boston, Denver and San Francisco also are moving quickly to green up their fleets.

In Chicago and most other cities, the dominant cab still is the gas-guzzling Ford Crown Victoria, a spacious sedan that averages just 14 miles a gallon and belches about 10 tons of greenhouse gases into the air every year.

Nearly 90 percent of Chicago's cabs are Crown Vics, which also are commonly used by police departments and other government agencies.

"We would love to have every taxi be a hybrid or alternative-fuel vehicle," said Bill McCaffrey, spokesman for the Chicago Department of Consumer Services, the agency that licenses taxicabs. "But it can't be done overnight."

Hybrids run on a combination of gasoline and electricity that makes the vehicles far more efficient than conventional cars and trucks. The electric powertrain does more of the work in stop-and-start city traffic and the gasoline-powered engine shuts off completely when a hybrid idles.

As a result, the Prius averages 48 miles a gallon in city driving. The hybrid Ford Escape SUV gets 34 miles per gallon.

Squeezing more miles out of a tank of gas is a huge selling point for cabbies who pay their own fuel bills.

"I used to fill up once a day, but now I'm stretching that to once every three days or more," said Fugiel, a wiry native of Humboldt Park who tucks his salt-and-pepper ponytail through a New York Yankees cap. ("I bought it after 9/11," he explained. "But I'm a lifelong fan of the Cubbies.")

At City Hall, some cabbies have been clamoring for a fare increase or a surcharge to offset higher gas prices. Aldermen have suggested there might be hearings, but Ald. Edward Burke (14th) and Tom Allen (38th) have introduced a resolution calling for more aggressive efforts to convert taxicabs and municipal vehicles to hybrids.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg already has made hybrid taxis a big part of his ambitious environmental agenda. Because cabs by law must be replaced every few years, New York is moving to require three times as many hybrid taxis on the streets by next year. That number would increase by 20 percent during each of the next four years.

Switching the city's 13,000 taxis to hybrids will have the same effect on air quality as taking 32,000 privately owned vehicles off the road, Bloomberg said last month when he unveiled the plan.

Based on estimates from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, an all-hybrid taxi fleet in Chicago would cut carbon dioxide emissions for cabs nearly in half, to about 36,000 tons a year. City government, by comparison, produced more than 1 million tons of greenhouse gases last year.

The city rule requiring at least a dozen hybrid taxis also gave cab companies an incentive to go green.

Conventional taxis must be replaced every four years, or five if they're kept in good shape. The new rule allows owners to keep hybrids on the street for an extra year.

Another veteran Chicago driver, Steve Wiedersberg, said the biggest drawback of hybrid vehicles is they generally are more expensive to buy than a Crown Victoria. There also are questions about the long-term durability of hybrids.

"I haven't driven one yet, but everybody is talking about these new cars," said Wiedersberg, former president of the Chicago Professional Taxi Cab Drivers Association. "Me, I'm used to my old gas burner, and I know it's cheap to fix."

Chicago Carriage Cab Co. put the city's first fleet-based hybrid on the street last week, a maroon Ford Escape. Simon Garber, the company's president, shares some the same concerns as his drivers but he also sees fuel-efficient cabs as a public-relations boost.

"It's a huge expense for us up front, but customers want to see these cars," Garber said. Fugiel said many of his customers have been surprised to find a roomy back seat. The trunk is big enough to hold a couple of large suitcases and the ride is smooth.

"It takes a while to get used to how quiet it is at a stop light," he said. "But I end up getting a lot of compliments from riders. In all my years of driving cabs, I've never had such a positive experience."