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Disability rights groups back Uber's upstate push

Disability-rights factions get behind ride-share app

By Chris Bragg Updated 10:57 pm, Sunday, December 20, 2015

As Uber looks to expand its operations upstate, a number of disability-rights groups are set to join a coalition on Monday pushing legislation allowing the ride-sharing application to operate legally here.

Detractors of Uber have criticized its drivers for lacking handicap-accessible vehicles, but the Uber supporters say the service has actually been a major boon to the disabled.

Local and national disability rights groups and individuals set join the "NY Needs Uber" coalition include Community Options Inc., Open Doors Organization, My Blind Spot, The Macula Vision Research Foundation the Resource Center for Independent Living, Prevent Blindness, and Tony Colon, chair of Utica's Access & Inclusion Committee.

"Uber's technology helps increase mobility for both riders and drivers and we are humbled to have the support of these accessibility community leaders whose work is so important for people across the country and across New York state," said Josh Mohrer, general manager of Uber NY. "Uber has worked closely with members of the accessibility community to improve the app and we are constantly innovating and exploring new ways to better serve all people with disabilities."

Another of Uber's supporters set to join the coalition is former California Congressman Tony Coelho, author of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Coelho has argued that the ride-sharing app has made hailing a ride less

discriminatory. For one, Uber drivers don't know whether riders are disabled when they accept a trip request. Coelho also says the vision-impaired have benefited by Uber's GPS-tracked system that offers an incentive for drivers to take more efficient routes, and accessibility features in that help request rides.

Uber is a ride-sharing app that connects paying passengers with drivers; the company does not own the vehicles used by drivers.

The announcement comes as a New York City-based group that advocates for those with spinal cord injuries, the United Spinal Association, has repeatedly called into question an alleged lack of wheelchair accessibility in Uber vehicles. The group, which in a September letter slammed Uber's "disgraceful history regarding wheelchair accessibility," has asked the Legislature to mandate wheelchair accessibility across Uber's fleet.

A number of Capital Region business leaders and lawmakers have come out in support of allowing ride-sharing apps here, arguing that local taxi service is unreliable and insufficient. But the Legislature must pass regulatory changes, including to insurance rules, allowing ride-sharing apps such as Uber and Lyft to operate upstate and on Long Island.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo has called for a statewide system of regulation for such technologies, which are currently allowed in New York City. Uber supports the statewide approach as well.

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