

downtown Q&A

AMIR CHIZIK
BICYTAXI OWNER

It was a motley crew that gathered in protest on the steps of City Hall on a frigid day last week. There were dreads and lip piercings, a SpongeBob SquarePants T-shirt topped by a Santa hat. In a black pea coat and dress pants, hair neatly swept up from his forehead, Amir Chizik, 28, stood among the leaders of the pedicab industry – one of them, but not exactly. He looked all business. He is.

Chizik, the city's largest pedicab owner, has made it his goal to professionalize an industry still in its wild infancy. He figured when the city finally decided to regulate pedicabs, he'd be way ahead of the game. Instead, the city may throw a wrench in his wheel by banning his bike model from the street altogether.

Your fiberglass BicyTaxis look a lot different from other pedicabs. Where do they come from?

I wanted to have something more customized for New York City, something modern, not something that they use the same bikes in India or China. I [did] research for about a year: what is the best pedicab that operates in the world? I got to the company in Germany, called Veloform, which produced the BicyTaxis. It's a one-body bike, the driver sits where he can spin and not, like, with his ass to the passengers. I think it's called recumbent. The body itself, it's much stronger, and I saw, you know, that it can be much safer... I wanted to be in the business, but I wanted to isolate myself in the industry.

Because they've got a heavy shell, all your BicyTaxis have motors that kick in while the operator is peddling. The City Council is considering a bill that would ban electric-assist pedicabs from the street. How would that affect you?

If they're going to ban the electric assist, I'm going to take [the motor] out, and I'm going to remove the shell. But I don't think that's what they really want. There is no sense in banning electric-assist. If you produce [pedicabs that] only [operate] by human-power, you're just going to end up with unsafe pedicabs on the street. This [shell] is polyethylene, 100-percent recyclable fiberglass. It's very very strong – stronger than a car. The safety of my passengers, and the drivers, that's my number one concern. That's the only reason I went for it. I don't want to take any kind of risk with those kinds of things.

How does an electric-assist motor work? The electric assist is only 250 watts, which is a third of a horsepower – which is nothing, really nothing. You can only use it if you're peddling. If you stop peddling, it stops assist[ing] you. When you go above 15 miles an hour, it also stops. It's the safest version it can be.

When you moved here from Israel, you had plans to work for your family's real estate company. Why did you then decide to start BicyTaxi?

I saw there were like three hundred pedicabs on the street two years ago, and the numbers just kept growing. And I really saw that there is no management, they're an unmanaged industry, they are not safe. I don't say all of them, but I say most of them.

believe that a restriction law will lead to a professional business. If it's more professional for the operator, it will be more professional for me, the owner. I think they should cap [the number of pedicabs]. Everything else in the city is capped. [Otherwise] you're going to have thousands of pedicabs on the street, which looks disgusting. But if they want to care about people in the city, why don't they do a price? Why don't they do some kind of a meter? They even don't check the pedicab itself, they don't say anything about the weight. What they're focused on [is] how to make this industry as small as they can, not how to make it as safe as they can.

The design of your cabs allows you to turn them into movable billboards. You've done ad campaigns internationally for clothing, watch and cell phone companies, a credit card, a magazine, a bank, even a brand of beer. Does revenue from advertising make up a good portion of your income?

The only money that we can make is [through] advertising. We cannot make any money by renting those pedicabs. It's really not a profitable business; it is not. If you have a taxi or you have a car, you can always put it on the street, but with those pedicabs, you must have a garage. It's better to buy a food cart to make hot dogs all day long – you can rent it for a nice price every day of the week – than a pedicab that can only operate if the weather is nice.

The City Council votes on February 28. What will you do if they decide to ban electric-assist pedicabs? I'm going to sue them, if they're going to do this. I've already retained Norman Siegel. I'm going to sue the city if they're going to do something that's against federal law. Don't say, "We ban electric assist." It's not your thing. You can do the pedicab law, but don't go into the definition of what a bicycle is. On this, you're going to lose.

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Not safe how?

Like you see them on the street, they're going however they want, between cars, no regulation. It's the only thing that's wild in New York. There's nothing else that's so wild as pedicabs.

You don't seem crunchy like the other pedicab guys. Do you hang out with them? No. I really don't like this industry on this kind of level, because most of the industry is... I don't want to say bums. There are some good, responsible owners. I look at it as different. I look at it as something I want to do national. New York City cannot stop me.

In relative terms, the eleven-year-old pedicab industry is still in its infancy. Is the city's decision to start regulating the industry a positive development? The more restrictive the law will be, [the more] favorable for me. I