



Limit on number of taxicabs on the road may survive end of PTC

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Wednesday, August 16, 2017 2:31pm

TAMPA State lawmakers abolished the Public Transportation Commission in part because they believed its regulations protected the taxicab industry from competition.

But Hillsborough County's replacement plan may also include a provision that makes it tougher for new taxicab firms to get a foothold in the market.

County commissioners on Wednesday gave initial approval to continuing the PTC's cap on the number of taxi permits. That could mean fledgling firms would have to try and buy permits from existing taxicab firms. The regulation could also make a dent in an estimated savings of \$1.5 million that county officials say will result from abolishing the agency.

To legally justify a cap, the county would have to commission a study that could cost about \$100,000, county attorneys told commissioners.

The push for a cap was a surprise to officials working on the plan to replace the PTC, said Kevin Jackson, the agency's interim executive director.

"The more the process makes its way through the system, I'm afraid it's going to look more like the PTC than originally intended," he said.

Hillsborough currently has about 700 vehicle permits for taxicabs. They are owned by taxicab and limo firms who rent taxicabs to drivers. The number is based on the county's population.

Support for continuing with a cap came from Commissioner Ken Hagan, who said it would give drivers a decent wage.

"It's not to protect the company and market share," he said. "It's to protect the drivers."

But current PTC board Chairman Al Higginbotham, who also serves as a commissioner, said communities like Phoenix, San Diego and Charlotte have recently abolished caps to encourage competition.

"The national trend has moved to no cap and free market," he said.

The PTC, which included field inspectors, had an operating budget of \$2.1 million.

County officials believe they can provide roughly the same service for \$584,000.

The result will be cheaper fees for taxicab and limo firms.

Under the new plan, Tax Collector Doug Belden's office will take over the issuance of public vehicle driving permits to taxicab drivers. Consumer complaints will be handled by the County Administrator's Office and the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office will take charge of investigating illegal towing practices. The regulation of non-emergency ambulances would fall to the county's Emergency Medical Planning Council.

"I feel very encouraged we will change around a broken system into something that is streamlined and works for the county and the riders," Belden told commissioners.