

Hailing and coughing

Montreal lags far behind other cities in getting hybrid cabs on city streets



HOW GREEN IS YOUR SMOG? Non-hybrid taxis

by **CHRIS HANNA**

It will be up to Montreal's 4,520 licensed cabbies themselves whether more of the city's taxis will be hybrid vehicles. Only four of Montreal's taxis were hybrid in 2008, when a committee was created to look into ways of increasing those numbers. Now, the committee has been revamped to include citizen and taxi industry representatives, a move City of Montreal spokesperson Martine Painchaud says will better identify the needs of the industry.

"Priorities change over time," she says, "but it's clear that hybrid taxis have not been a priority since 2008." The committee was created last fall, but has not yet issued any recommendations.

The figures from 2008 are the most recent, but Conseil régional de l'environnement de Montréal spokesperson Daniel Bouchard

believes there has not been much progress.

"An emphasis needs to be put on the greening of taxis," Bouchard says. "Taxis going hybrid, unlike ordinary citizens' cars which are unused for 95 per cent of their lifespans, would have a much more considerable impact on the environment and the decrease of greenhouse gas emissions."

The hybridization of Montreal's taxi fleet is likely to be a slower process than other North American cities because, unlike Victoria, B.C., and New York City, taxi drivers are often using their own cars to pick up fares.

"[Cab companies] don't own any of the cars," says Denis Laramée, deputy general manager at Taxi Diamond. "We would love it if there were more green cars, but we are not in a position to start offering our drivers incentives."

Laramée says that he knows of one of his 1,000-plus drivers who uses a hybrid vehicle. "We are the intermediary for the taxi service," he says of the role his company plays. "We are a sort of rental centre. We have nothing to gain from all of this. The incentives would really have to come from the governments and go to the drivers directly."

The sentiments were echoed by the president of Taxi Van Médic, Serge Leblanc, who says that in Quebec, it is the cabbies' choice alone to switch to hybrid vehicles, but their willingness to do so has historically been low.

In their 2011 budget, the Quebec government earmarked \$5-million to offer subsidies of up to \$2,000 to people who buy a hybrid vehicle and use it as a taxi. The starting price for a Toyota Camry LE, one of the most popular car models for taxis, is \$23,700 before taxes. The Toyota Camry Hybrid retails for almost \$27,000. According to Toyota's website, the Camry LE's fuel consumption rating is 8.2L/100km in the city, compared to the Camry Hybrid's 4.5L/100km, almost doubling a driver's mileage between trips to the pump.

Mohan Kang is the president of the B.C. Taxi Association, a non-profit organization that represents taxi workers and companies in British Columbia, where Kang says a large majority of taxis are hybrid.

"Within four or five years, you could pay off [the extra cost of a hybrid vehicle] with the money you are saving on gas," he says.

Jacob Leibovitch, executive director at iTaxiworkers Association, a non-profit group representing 900 cabbies in Toronto, where a lot more taxis are company-owned rather than operator-owned, says only 10 per cent of the association's members drive hybrid cars.

"Companies may not prioritize fuel efficient vehicles," he explains. "They can offload the fuel cost to the driver." ■