

John Macdonald
1901–1200 Kanata Ave.
Ottawa, ON K2K 9K5
(613) 123-4321

1 October 2014

Mayor Jim Watson
110 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 1J1
(613) 580-2496
Jim.Watson@ottawa.ca

UBER IN OTTAWA

Mayor Watson,

I'm writing concerning your position on the Uber driving service in Ottawa. While major cities in 45 countries, including 115 cities across North America, have embraced this new generation of social transportation, our city, under your leadership, has been intent on prosecuting it.

Uber offers a more convenient, more efficient, and less expensive mode of transportation; it's a long-overdue alternative to traditional taxi services. Further, it affords a casual or secondary income for Ottawa drivers. And when drivers are able to pick up passengers on the way to their own destinations, the service functions in the same way as carpooling—helping to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution.

For these reasons, it is obvious why the citizens of Ottawa want this service in our city. It makes no sense to us why such a positive innovation would come under attack.

Yet it has come under attack, even by you: “Mayor Jim Watson is among the municipal politicians who have backed city staff, saying Uber needs to follow taxi regulations” (Mills, Carys. (2014, October 5). Two Uber drivers charged over the weekend. *Ottawa Citizen*.).

Of course, the ostensible reason for the city's opposition is public safety: Susan Jones, general manager of emergency and protective services, said “From our perspective, we are cautioning the public to not be taking free rides unless they're ensured those safety regulations are in place” (Ottawa to target unlicensed Uber rideshare with fines. (2014, October 5). *CBC News Ottawa*.). She was referring to vehicle inspections, criminal background checks, and in-vehicle cameras.

Now consider Uber in the context of those safety concerns. Vehicles on Ontario roads are already required to meet safety standards, and Uber requires all vehicles registered with the service to be newer than 2005. And for what it's worth, I have never ridden in a traditional taxicab that *didn't* have its check-engine light glowing on the dashboard.

Uber also requires all drivers to complete a criminal background check. In fact, Uber has most of the same requirements for their drivers as does Ottawa's "Standard Taxicab Driver License Requirements" (By-law No. 2012 - 258). In addition, Uber drivers must be at least 21 years of age compared to the city's requirement: only 18 years of age.

As for the cameras in taxicabs, they might afford security to the taxi driver, but they offer no real protection to passengers; taxi drivers who want to commit an offence against their passengers can easily disable or cover the device. Further, the camera footage would be useless anyway unless the passenger knows which taxi he or she was riding in, which is unlikely given that most victims have been intoxicated or unconscious.

Conversely, with Uber, all of the bookings are tracked electronically, so every rider can always look up who their driver was—certainly a deterrent for would-be offenders. There is no such security with regular taxis who anonymously pick up passengers on the street.

Unfortunately, Uber drivers have already been accused of committing sexual assaults in other cities, despite all the precautions in place. But there have been recent stories in Ottawa news indicting traditional taxicab drivers for sexually assaulting their passengers, too. Crimes occur in many places for various reasons. But those crimes alone are insufficient grounds for banning the services with which they're associated. We still have public transportation. We still have park pathways that people can use at night. We still use a host of public websites that allow strangers to meet up for various reasons. We should have all these things—and we should have Uber—because their benefits are manifestly greater than their occasional social costs.

To boot, the more accessible and more affordable a driver service is, the more likely it is to be used by people who might otherwise drive impaired. Uber is notably less expensive than traditional taxi services, and it is a lot easier to use. Therefore, I suspect that having Uber in our city would, in addition to all the above benefits, also decrease the incidence of impaired drivers on our streets.

For these reasons, Mr. Watson, I urge you to reconsider your position on this innovative new company. By-laws are created in the best interests of our city. But as times and circumstances change, so must the way we think, and so must the regulations we choose to enforce.

Respectfully,



cc: Kate Heartfield, Editorial Pages Editor at Ottawa Citizen
Jeffrey Weshler, General Manager at Uber
The 2014 Ottawa Mayoral Candidates