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## A statement by Bert Ely to the Alexandria City Council

January 12, 2008

### Alexandria Taxicabs

Mr. Mayor and members of Council, I am Bert Ely, an Old Town resident and business owner. I am here to ask Council to repeal a requirement that a taxicab company serving Alexandria have an average of two dispatched calls per cabbie per day. I speak only as a frequent cab rider – I have no ownership, client, or other interest in Alexandria taxicabs. Most of my trips are to D.C., but others are to airports and elsewhere in the City.

I have three concerns about enforcement of a two-dispatches-per-driver-per day rule – a decline in taxicab company competition, a decline in the availability of cabs cruising the streets, and the impact of the cost of a radio dispatching mandate on taxicab availability.

Enforcing this dispatch rule will reduce the number of cab companies serving the City while making it extremely difficult for new companies to enter the market. It is absolutely vital that there be vigorous competition among the cab companies and new entrants into the business as that will keep the established companies on their toes. As a cab rider, I greatly fear reduced competition. For years, I rode with Yellow Cab, until their dispatch service got so bad that I switched to Diamond Cab. I used Diamond for a few years, until Jim Yates took it over, at which time its dispatch service quickly worsened. In recent years, I have ridden with White Top. While its service has been good, I have noticed some decline in service as it installs a new computerized dispatch system. I may yet have to use another cab company. If the City retains the two-dispatches-per-day rule, I may not have any choice left as to whom I call for a cab.

My second concern revolves around the lack of cabs cruising Old Town to pick up people who want to hail a cab instead of taking the time to call a cab company. One of the hallmarks of successful business centers is the ready availability of cruising cabs so that one does not have to call and then wait for a cab. There have been numerous occasions when I have had to hail a cab along King or Washington, sometimes when the cab I called never shows up – it usually takes 10 or 15 minutes to get a cab. I suspect it is even harder to hail a cab in Carlyle or elsewhere in the City. I know the cab companies to call if I need a cab and where the cab stands are, but visitors usually don't have that information, which makes obtaining a cab a real hassle.

The lack of cruising cabs is one of the hallmarks of marginal business areas and small cities and towns, not vibrant commercial centers. Given the City's understandable interest in strengthening Alexandria's commercial tax base, that cause is hardly helped by potentially limiting the number of taxicabs to the twice the number of cabs dispatched on the average day.

My third objection to the two-per-day-dispatch rule revolves around the cost of operating and marketing a radio-dispatch system. In order for the radio-dispatch business model to be successful, it probably needs far more than two calls per driver per day. While the street-cruising taxicab business model does not need any dispatching capability, those cabbies sometimes wait long times between fares, which can be costly. Instead of forcing every cab company to follow the radio-dispatch business model, the City should permit each model to flourish side-by-side, with market demand determining the relative availability of radio-dispatched and hailed cabs. Letting each business model flourish should increase the availability of taxicabs.

Based on these observations from a 25-plus year user of Alexandria cabs, I strongly encourage Council to repeal the two-dispatches-per-day rule and to take such other steps as are necessary to increase the number of cabs cruising the City's streets to serve those cab riders seeking to hail a cab.

Thank you for your time this morning. I welcome your questions.