


The change actually took effect May 1, but the city gave the drivers a month's grace period before enforcing the law. Despite the controversy, demand to be a driver is growing, with nearly 1,000 people taking the most recent taxi licensing exam this spring, according to the commission.

Cab rides in the District start at \$3 for the first sixth of a mile; each additional mile is \$1.50. For trips that start and end in the District and make no stops, the fare cap is \$19. Drivers don't like the rate or cap, and they don't like that they no longer are permitted to pick up more than one separate fare except at Union Station.

Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D), who mandated the switch, said the first year has been a success.

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"I think there's a lot more reliability and confidence in the system, and I have heard both from residents and from cab drivers that they like it," Fenty said. Still, he added, "I will stipulate that it is not unanimous."

The installation of meters brought the District in line with cities including New York and Boston and eliminated a 1930s-era zone system that struck many residents and tourists as byzantine.

But drivers say the old system helped them earn a living and preserved their independence, a critical legacy. At a time

when African Americans were denied federal jobs or given low-level positions because of racism, local residents say driving a taxi gave them a foothold into American society. Many African immigrants who came to the District in the decades since have followed that path.

John Bugg, 73, a D.C. native who now lives in Upper Marlboro, said that when he applied for government jobs in 1959, despite his background as a Army veteran, he was repeatedly rejected and sometimes told to his face that his skin color was "too dark." Bugg landed a job at the old General Accounting Office, where he found other African Americans in the procurement department who introduced him to working a second shift.

"All of them had taxicabs, so they helped me get my taxicab. And I got out there and started working once I got off at night," said Bugg, who has been driving for 50 years.

Under the old system, the city was divided into eight zones with pricing based on each geographical area. A short trip that crossed zones could cost more under that system than a meter trip today. Passengers unfamiliar with the boundaries and tourists unaware of the zones complained that they did not know whether the prices they were being charged were fair.

For example, at Alabama Avenue and Naylor Road in Southeast Washington, each corner was in a different zone and represented a different fare.

Graham Hodges, a history professor at Colgate University and former taxi driver, said as a culture, taxi drivers like to control the amount of income they make but don't tend to talk in specifics about their revenue.

"With the zone system, the driver was accustomed to a certain level of pay based on the zones," said Hodges, who has written a book about the history of cabs in New York. "There's this accepted wage that they've been getting, and then all of a sudden, people realize that they don't have to pay that much," he said of the switch.

Council member Jim Graham (D-Ward 1), among those who oversee the taxi agency, listened to hours of testimony this spring from frustrated drivers. Graham said the change has improved transparency for customers. But he has asked the commission for data to help analyze the financial impact.

The business community, meanwhile, which had long wanted metered cabs to make it easier for tourists and other visitors, believes the change was beneficial.

"It's predictable, and frankly for us, it's a bit cheaper," said Barbara B. Lang, president of the D.C. Chamber of Commerce. "Tourists are used to metered cabs. This whole zone thing was confusing for them. This gives them some assurance that they're not being hosed by cabdrivers."

Lang said she was open to city officials reviewing the current rate structure and possibly even raising the current \$3 base rate. But "no more than \$4," she said.