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How Green Is My Yellow Cab

In theory, at least, there seems to be agreement that hybrid taxicabs are a good idea. Curtailing pollution from New York's nearly 13,000 cabs could only help air quality in the city, among the worst in the nation. Moreover, the bigger energy picture points to the necessity of finding alternatives to fossil fuels - or at least more efficient ways of using fossil fuels - and easing Americans' unsustainable dependence on them.

Hybrids, which run on a combination of gas and electricity and are far more fuel efficient than ordinary cars, are an inevitable part of that search. Now would be a good time to embrace them.

In reality, however, hybrid cabs have gone nowhere in New York. The city's Taxi and Limousine Commission, which once put television screens in back seats, has not hurried to put alternative fuel taxis on the road. Now the City Council, in legislation being ushered through by David Yassky of Brooklyn and John Liu of Queens, plans to force the issue. The legislation would allow taxi owners to have the option of using a hybrid vehicle as a yellow cab, maybe as soon as the fall.

It's about time. Hybrids are no longer newfangled creations. San Francisco has been using 10 Ford Escape hybrids in its taxi fleet and is expected to increase the numbers next year. Many Americans have purchased hybrids for personal use, and in some areas, the wait for delivery on a new vehicle is months long. Demand is so high that the problem may be finding available vehicles once taxi medallion owners finally get the green light.

Most cabdrivers currently use the Crown Victoria stretch model made by Ford. It's a big car and, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council, gets about 12 miles a gallon on congested city streets. A cabdriver can pay as much as \$100 a day to keep the tank full. Even though the cars are equipped with catalytic converters, they inevitably add to the city's air pollution, contributing to asthma, other respiratory diseases and global warming. Hybrids might get three times the miles per gallon, meaning we could all breath a bit easier.

Converting some of the city's taxi fleet to hybrids would also dovetail nicely with other efforts to clean New York's air. With a push from environmental groups, the city has gradually been replacing its dirty, older diesel buses with cleaner natural-gas vehicles and diesel-electric hybrids. More than 10 percent of New York City Transit's 4,500-bus fleet now consists of natural-gas or diesel-electric hybrids, with welcome reductions in particulates and nitrogen and sulfur oxides.

Hybrid taxis make similar environmental sense. And even though hybrids cost more initially, with tax breaks and fuel savings, they seem to make economic sense as well.

The main complaint about hybrids has to do with comfort. But the battle is over inches, as few as three, in the back seats of some hybrid models. And the suffering, if it could be called that, would be brief. The average ride in a New York cab is two and a half miles and about eight minutes. And, let's face it, most passengers are not the Knicks or even the Rockettes, and they won't be doing yoga in the back seat. While most cab owners might want larger cars, it would be heartening to see a smaller hybrid, like a smooth-riding Toyota Prius, as part of the New York yellow cab fleet.

The city, with its legions of cabs, has an opportunity to set an example for other urban areas. And like it or not, gas-guzzling big taxis will eventually go the way of the dinosaur, bringing the issue of fossil fuel full circle.

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