

By CALE OTTENS Staff Reporter

Activists Grab Ridesharing Wheel

TRANSPORTATION: Petition aims to drive off services at LAX.

While there are now four ridesharing startups awaiting the green light to begin picking up passengers at Los Angeles International Airport, another speed bump might be coming up.



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Steering Debate: Denny Schneider, with ridesharing opponent Alliance for a Regional Solution to Airport Congestion, at Los Angeles International Airport.

That's because a Westchester activist group has challenged city and airport officials over whether they conducted a proper environmental study in allowing companies such as San Francisco's Uber Technologies Inc. and Lyft Inc. to operate at LAX.

The group – Alliance for a Regional Solution to Airport Congestion – filed a petition earlier this month in Los Angeles Superior Court, claiming the city violated the California Environmental Quality Act, or CEQA.

The law, which is intended to ensure the public and decision-makers fully understand the environmental impacts of a proposed project, has been roundly criticized by business groups and developers for inviting frivolous litigation and stalling development.

Yet despite the law's reputation, simply filing a CEQA petition in court is not enough to bring a project to a halt, said Ben Reznik, chairman of the government, land-use, environment and energy department at Century City law firm Jeffer Mangels Butler & Mitchell.

Indeed, a judge must first sign off on a temporary restraining order or preliminary injunction before a project may legally be forced to stop, said Reznik, who represents both developers and project opponents in CEQA disputes.

Some developers, for instance, may decide to put their construction project on hold until any CEQA-related dispute is resolved to avoid pumping money into something they may ultimately have to alter, he said.

"Oftentimes they will decide to sit tight and wait for the litigation to end before they spend money on their project," Reznik said, adding that it's also fairly common for lenders to withhold additional funding due to the increased uncertainty.

But that's not a concern for this proposal, namely because no funding would be required in allowing ridesharing companies to operate at LAX.

Denny Schneider, the activist group's president, said he does not have immediate plans to ask for a restraining order to block ridesharing at LAX – even if that means his day in court comes after Uber's black cars or Lyft's neon mustaches start rolling through the airport.

Nancy Castles, a spokeswoman for Los Angeles World Airports, the agency that runs LAX, wouldn't discuss whether the CEQA filing could further delay ridesharing companies' arrival. But she said the negotiation process is still ongoing as LAWA has requested additional documents from each of the four applicants.

"LAWA staff is diligently reviewing the applications," Castles said in an email. "LAWA is aware of the public demand and we are prepared to issue the nonexclusive license agreements as soon as the required information is received."

In addition to Uber and Lyft, which both submitted applications in September, Hawthorne's Executive Ride and Tickengo Inc. in San Francisco have now begun the application process. Executive Ride, the parent company of Opoli, applied on Nov. 12, whereas Tickengo, parent of airport-based ridesharing app Wingz, just joined the effort last week, Castles said.

Congestion concerns

Angelenos have been calling for ridesharing startups, which allow customers to request and pay for taxi-like rides via mobile apps, to expand into LAX for years now. These services are often billed as a cheaper and more convenient alternative to traditional taxis.

The push to allow Uber, Lyft and their competitors to pick up passengers from LAX received a big boost in April when Mayor Eric Garcetti promised to ensure ridesharing companies would be allowed to accept passengers by summertime.

But now, as summer has come and gone, it remains unclear when – or even if – ridesharing will be a legal option for LAX travelers looking for a cheap ride home. With the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday weekend expected to bring a record number of travelers through the airport, the delay is likely costing both riders and drivers significant income.

While there is no data available to examine the price difference among ridesharing operators and traditional cabbies leaving from LAX, Uber published a study in July that found, on average, the company's service was less expensive than taxis in L.A.'s low-income neighborhoods.

The average cost for an Uber ride in all low-income neighborhoods, according to the report, was \$6.40, compared with \$14.63 that taxis charged to go the same distance.

Connie Llanos, a spokeswoman for Garcetti, did not respond to requests for comment.

Lyft spokeswoman Chelsea Wilson, however, said the company remains “optimistic that we’ll be fully operational at LAX by the end of the year.”

Meanwhile, Schneider, who’s behind the lawsuit, is in no hurry to see the arrival of ridesharing at the airport, which sits about two miles from his Westchester home.

“I was originally ambivalent about the (ridesharing services),” he said. “But the more I learned about how they operate and some of the issues, say for instance, with air quality or traffic that was going to be generated, I got concerned.”

For example, Schneider said in his petition that Los Angeles is among several cities in the state that require higher clean-fuel standards on taxis, but ridesharing companies wouldn’t be held to the same standard.

His concerns prompted him to ask the City Council, which took over the decision-making process in July, to study how ridesharing companies could affect airport congestion and emission levels before letting Uber and Lyft drivers to pick up LAX travelers.

The council rejected Schneider’s bid as well as an appeal he filed shortly thereafter. Airport officials have said in reports to the council that the city’s proposed agreements do not “result in a direct or reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change to the environment,” and an environmental study is not required by law. That wasn’t good enough for Schneider. “Just calling it not necessary is not acceptable to us,” he said. “We were left with no choice but to go to court.”

What’s next?

Schneider, a retired staff scientist and project manager in the aerospace industry, has gone up against LAX and city officials several times. He joined the Alliance for a Regional Solution to Airport Congestion shortly after it was founded 20 years ago.

Perhaps the group’s most successful fight came in 2006, when it settled a lawsuit against the city that it had filed over complaints about the master plan for LAX. LAWA agreed to provide more than \$300 million over the next decade to help fund noise and traffic mitigation in areas around the airport as well as other improvements such as street lights and more job opportunities.

Despite his background, Schneider said he never intended to become an airport activist. But, he said, his late wife, Nan, encouraged him to take a stand after she saw two planes nearly collide midair.

“What happens is, you start with one issue, like the airport noise in the sky, and what happens from there is you get interested in all the other things going on,” he said. “Our objective each and every time we’re dealing with the airport is to make LAX better. We want a safe and convenient airport.”

The first hearing in his case, filed Nov. 2, has not yet been scheduled, but Schneider said he plans to continue his pursuit in court even if L.A. officials decide to begin allowing ridesharing at the airport in coming weeks or months.