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Passengers queueing at AMK Hub's taxi stand in Ang Mo Kio on March 21. Regulations will be adjusted to lower operating costs for operators to arrest the decline in Singapore's taxi fleet. ST PHOTO: HENG YI-HSIN

A vital need for some, but flagging a cab is getting harder

Seniors, tourists among those who rely on street-hails amid dwindling fleet

Esther Loi and Whitney William

For housewife Lilian Law, 74, hailing a taxi from the roadside is "not possible" these days as fewer taxis are on the roads.

The senior citizen does not have or know how to use ride-hailing apps, and has "no choice" but to get

a cab from Parkway Parade's taxi stand on her return home from grocery shopping.

She takes public transport to get to the mall in Marine Parade as there are no taxi stands near her home in Tanjong Rhu.

Despite the widespread use of ride-hailing apps, Ms Law is among a sizeable number of passengers who still rely heavily on taxis and street-hail services, most of whom

are seniors, tourists and people without ride-hailing apps.

The authorities recently announced moves, as part of a review of the point-to-point transport sector, to arrest the decline in Singapore's taxi fleet.

Regulations will be adjusted to lower operating costs for operators, including extending the statutory lifespan of non-electric cabs from eight to 10 years.

This comes as Singapore's pool of taxis and the proportion of street-hail rides – when a taxi is flagged down on the streets or hired at taxi stands – have tumbled.

Only 12.3 per cent of point-to-point journeys in January 2024 were street-hail trips, compared with 22.4 per cent in January 2021, according to the latest Land Transport Authority statistics. The rest were ride-hail trips made via app or call bookings.

In January 2024, there were 74,000 street-hail trips daily on average, a fraction of the 527,000 ride-hail journeys. There were 13,485 taxis in that month, a decline from 15,888 taxis in January 2021.

While the proportion of street-hail rides has fallen, taxis and street-hail services remain important, Senior Minister of State for Transport Amy Khor said during a debate on the Ministry of Transport's budget on March 5.

She added that taxis are critical in places such as airports and provide an important supply of rides, especially late at night when it is more difficult to get a private-hire car.

Over the last 1½ weeks, The Sunday Times' interviews with 34 taxi passengers showed that those who use street-hail services regularly include tourists, seniors, parents with young children and the price-conscious.

At Changi Airport on the evening of March 21, ST counted 45 people waiting for taxis at Terminals 1 and 3, with a longer queue of 35 passengers at Terminal 1.

Tutor Sheila Viswanathan, 48, was waiting for a cab at Terminal 3. She said getting a taxi there was more convenient than booking a private-hire car through ride-hailing apps such as Grab because of its immediacy and minimal wait time.

Seniors, such as a 78-year-old retired teacher who wanted to be known only as Ms Foong, do not know how to download or use ride-hailing apps.

But it is also "not easy to get a taxi" these days, she said, adding that it is common to wait at least 15 to 20 minutes for one at a taxi stand during off-peak hours. Calling for a taxi via a taxi hotline or hailing one from the roadside "is even harder", as there are fewer cabs on the roads.

Parents of young children, like Ms Cho, 35, who requested not to be identified by her first name, turn to street-hail rides when they travel with their kids, since taxis are exempt from the law that requires children under 1.35m to be secured using booster seats in vehicles.

Ms Cho, who is between jobs, said child-friendly trips on ride-hailing services are more expensive and

harder to get.

To avoid the longer wait and higher fares, Ms Cho would occasionally book a regular private-hire vehicle and bring her own child seat, but some drivers get "really angry" as it takes awhile for her to install the seat.

Payment executive Phuong Dao, 29, a Vietnamese tourist, said he prefers getting a cab because of the ease of hiring one from taxi stands.

Others, like company owner Tim Kusuma, 44, avoid using private-hire vehicles and have not downloaded ride-hailing apps.

Some private-hire vehicle drivers, he said, could be "sensitive" about their own cars, so he would rather use taxis, all of which are "treated as commercial... rather than personal".

Then there are the price-conscious.

Accountant Ros Osman, 32, said ride-hailing services cost about twice as much as street-hail rides on average.

Ms Ros also said it is "very rare" to see a taxi near her home in Bukit Merah, and it is "quite hard" to flag one down by the roadside.

She gets a cab this way only once every two weeks.

CABBIES SOURCING TRIPS FROM APPS

Trans-Cab driver Francis Seah, 68, is an outlier among his peers, as he has not signed up with any ride-hailing app to obtain bookings.

The veteran cabby of 20 years is not in favour of the practice of "picking and choosing customers" based on whichever mode offers higher fares, be it street-hail trips, taxi hotline bookings or assignments from ride-hailing apps.

There is "no honesty" in doing so, he said.

But most of the 14 taxi drivers ST interviewed reported that street-hail rides take up just 5 per cent to 20 per cent of the trips they complete daily.

ComfortDelGro cabby Nelson – who wanted to be known just by his first name – said he accepts street-hail rides only from tourist spots and areas with location surcharges. These include places such as the city area and Gardens by the Bay.

The 39-year-old usually turns to street-hail jobs when demand is low on ride-hailing apps.

Mr Song, a Strides Premier taxi driver in his 40s who spoke to ST on condition of partial anonymity, said he prefers ride-hailing app bookings as they come in one after another.

This saves him a lot of time and effort as he does not have to "roam around aimlessly and waste petrol". He picks up passengers on the streets only when it is quiet on the apps.

Ride-hailing fares, he noted, can be twice the price of street-hail rides at certain times, such as during the morning rush hour.

Mr Sanchez, 41, a Trans-Cab cabby, mostly accepts bookings from

various ride-hailing platforms because he does not have to wait around for customers.

In March so far, he has picked up just one passenger from a taxi stand, with the rest of his trips being sourced from apps.

Despite the dwindling number of street-hail trips, taxi operators said such services are still vital.

Mr Neo Nam Heng, chairman of diversified motor group Prime, which operates Prime Taxi, said street-hail rides are a necessity for some passengers to get around.

Mr Neo said limousine taxis, for instance, cater to the needs of tourists at Changi Airport and the Singapore Cruise Centre.

To revitalise the taxi industry, Mr Neo proposed an increase in financial support through tax concessions for taxi operators and injecting new blood into the industry by allowing permanent residents above the age of 50 to drive taxis.

At present, only Singaporeans aged 30 and above qualify for a taxi driver's or private-hire car driver's licence.

Mr Tommy Tan, chief executive of ComfortDelGro Taxi, Singapore's largest taxi operator with about 8,700 cabs, noted that street-hail rides "fulfil a vital niche" in the point-to-point transport sector, particularly for seniors, tourists and people without access to mobile apps.

Adding that further change is necessary to create a level playing field for taxis, Mr Tan said ComfortDelGro hopes the Government can consider more measures to reduce operating costs and lower barriers for drivers wishing to join the industry. The company declined to elaborate further when asked.

Ms Jasmine Tan, general manager of Trans-Cab, said there is still a market for street-hail rides.

She added that her company, which has about 2,100 cabs, is observing and monitoring the market before deciding on further steps to improve the uptake of street-hail services.

Strides Premier, majority-owned by SMRT subsidiary Strides Holdings, declined comment.

Singapore Management University Assistant Professor Terence Fan, who specialises in transport issues, said having taxis roam busy locations is a form of "soft power" that puts Singapore on a par with other cosmopolitan cities such as London and New York City.

He added that taxi operators should encourage their drivers to ply the streets with the promise of potential customers, through methods such as providing prospective passengers with information on the availability and expected wait times of street-hail services in different locations.

Associate Professor Walter Theiseira, head of the urban transportation programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, pointed to the relevance of street-hail services at key places with robust taxi-stand infrastructure, such as shopping centres and hospitals.

But the problem lies with lower revenues from street-hail services than from ride-hailing trips, which discourage drivers from picking passengers up at taxi stands.

"So it is not just an issue of where demand is – it's also about making the demand pay, relative to ride hail," said Prof Theiseira.

estloi@sph.com.sg
whitney@sph.com.sg

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74,000

Average number of street-hail trips daily in January.

527,000

Average number of ride-hail trips daily in January.