

Taxi carnival could be answer to our problems

THIRD Ear Music has been motivating the idea of an annual taxi carnival for many years. We have made proposals to the various traffic, road safety and transport departments and to ministers and various authorities.

Individual reaction to the project is always extremely positive, but nothing concrete, in devising ways and means of implementing this project, has happened.

Given the Daily News's concern and the Taxi supplement planned for tomorrow, Third Ear Music would like to open up these ideas for general discussion.

This proposal sets out to suggest a unique road safety and commuter participation plan - a long-term, country-wide annual taxi carnival - a music and entertainment festival similar to the truckers' carnivals held in the US and Europe.

It could involve everybody connected (directly, or indirectly) to the South African minibus taxi industry throughout the year - from commuters to service stations, toll plazas to the media, supported by their advertisers and sponsors.

Commuters could participate through community organisations, and regional and provincial authorities.

Basically taxis "compete" for prizes/incentives and media attention. Competitive incentives and public participation would be an effective way to stop unroad-worthy taxis and kamikaze drivers.

It would give the commuters and other road-users a voice.

A taxi carnival would re-focus attitudes and perceptions on a unique industry. The majority of taxi drivers and owners are being made to suffer with negative publicity because of a small minority of reckless drivers and unscrupulous owners whose actions hog the headlines.

The public, sponsors and the motor vehicle service industries view the taxi in a pessimistic light from the sidelines.

An event such as this could get everybody involved.

The "problems of the taxi" would become part of a unique challenge to which we all need to get involved to find a solution.

The taxi industry has proved that South Africans are an enterprising and innovative lot. They make a plan! The minibus/taxi has fast become a unique and integral part of our daily lives - commuters are moved from home to workplace, town to city, culture to culture - the taxi can no longer simply be considered a means of transport only. It has become a way of life for millions of people.

Sub-cultures within the communities that the taxi serves, are being created - a multi-billion dollar industry with spin-offs and

benefits to countless enterprises throughout Southern Africa.

The high accident rate at specific times of the year, the violence in certain areas where the regulation of routes and ownership disputes are impossible to enforce through law-enforcement and traffic controls alone, are the problems that this project seeks to address.



ON TIME: Unique road safety and commuter participation plan in the form of an annual taxi carnival has been proposed.

Taxis are not being used, as effectively as they could be, by all South Africans. There is more to their use than just transporting passengers in particular areas. An ongoing project such as this could help develop more effective and efficient means of expanding the industry into cities and suburbs. Cape Town seems to be the only big city where taxis are cross-cultural and multi-purpose - advertisers, the postal-services, for small parcel freight, tourists and residents etc. But they have to look good and be safe!

The idea of the taxi carnival goes back to the US in the '60s where the trucking industry experienced similar problems between long-haul truckers (teamsters) and road-users.

I travelled with truckers for five months, transporting massive sound system rigs for

concerts, from festivals such as Woodstock to tours with the Rolling Stones, and found that most truckers took pride in the safety and upkeep of their vehicles - they looked magnificent. Regular checks (driver logs) with prizes and incentives at road-side truck-stops by transport authorities and manufacturers, made the industry an impressive one to be part of.

The over-subscribed routes, unscrupulous fleet-owners, badly maintained vehicles, the pressure on drivers to deliver at all costs, moving as many loads/passengers as quickly as possible for meagre remuneration in the taxi business has been a recipe for disaster. It can be contained.

Young people who want to go into the taxi industry should see it as an honourable profession and not as a means to an end. It worked for the truckers and their service industries in the US and Europe. It could be adapted to work in South Africa.

The project could take the form of regular taxi carnival and parades - from local and community venues, to regional and provincial, eventually culminating in an annual national event.

Taxis would gather over a day or two to show-off their vehicles, listen to music/entertainment and compete (after qualifying through the year) for sponsored prizes in various categories, for example Best Maintained Vehicle, Safest Driver, Most Accident-free Fleet, Best Interiors, Sound Systems, Decor, and so forth.

Regular en-route events could be held to encourage drivers to complete log books, at toll gates and service stations. En-route awards to drivers and points for vehicles in safe driving can be allocated for eventual participation in the annual awards event.

Participation by sponsors, road councils, local authorities and community organisations, with prizes and incentives from insurance and petrol companies can be sought.

Community pressure through the media in the US forced commercial sponsors connected to the trucker industry and unions to introduce a variety of incentives.

The top-down, big-stick approach is not working. It's no match for the guns and kamikaze drivers that are out there waiting for accidents to happen.

A project like this has to develop from the bottom up and may take some years, but given what the rural and township commuters have had to put up with these past 15 years, it should soon take off.

The few bad drivers, fleet owners and protection racketeers that resist participating would soon be forced to, or give up.

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