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TRANSPORTATION

Province does abrupt U-turn to arrival of ride-sharing Uber

Minister says service and taxis can 'thrive' side-by-side

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VICTORIA — The B.C. government is softening its criticism of popular ride-sharing business Uber, saying it's only a matter of time before the service launches here, and admitting it could safely coexist with the existing taxi industry.

"I believe it's a matter of when, not if, ridesharing will be prevalent in B.C., and I do believe the two industries can coexist side-by-side, thrive and grow," Transportation Minister Todd Stone said Wednesday.

"I think there's a growing recognition (of) the issues of convenience, of choice, of competition, which British Columbians are increasingly expecting."

The comments mark a shift in tone from Stone, who in 2014 reacted to rumours of Uber's launch in Vancouver with the threat of fines against the company and a promise to deploy undercover officers to catch any unlicensed drivers.

Stone had warned of "significant consequences" to Uber and its drivers if they tried to operate without the same licensing rules, inspection regime and safety checks that taxi drivers face from B.C.'s Passenger Transportation Branch.

"Safety is our No. 1 concern and we're going to make darn sure that any company (that) wishes to provide a taxi-like service

in British Columbia, that they meet the same requirements as all existing companies have to," Stone said in 2014.

On Wednesday he said the government has since "had lots of good discussion with ride-sharing companies like Uber."

Uber has been pushing government to craft regulations that would allow its drivers to obtain special licences and be considered different from traditional taxis.

"We are ready to work quickly with Premier Clark and Minister Stone to introduce a new regulatory framework that embraces ridesharing in the upcoming spring session," said Uber official Susie Heath.

"In terms of regulations, as we saw from court rulings last year in both Ontario and Alberta, ridesharing is a new business model that is distinct from taxi," she said.

Uber has said it would prefer new licensing regulations for what's called a transportation network company, which would set requirements for fees, insurance, driver checks, GPS tracking and other ways Uber would be different from traditional taxis. Stone wouldn't commit Wednesday, only saying that existing rules and licences remain in place for now.

"Any significant changes to existing regulatory environment would only be made after extensive discussions with existing stakeholders, namely, the taxi industry," he said.

The impending arrival of Uber has sparked intense public discussion about taxi waiting times, service levels to the suburbs, insurance, safety, and the complex way taxi licences work in the province.

"We are certainly hearing from lots of British Columbians who'd like to see ridesharing come to the province," said Stone.

Some are perplexed by Stone's changing tone on Uber. Vancouver city councillor Geoff Meggs called it an almost complete reversal.

"A year ago he was laying down the law," Meggs said. "On what basis is he now saying it's inevitable? Has he made an arrangement with Uber?"

Stone's comments come as the governing B.C. Liberal party gauges public support for Uber as a potential wedge issue in two byelections in Metro Vancouver.

The NDP has pledged to support the existing taxi industry, and in 2014 attempted to pass a bill to hike fines against Uber drivers who might try to operate without a permit.

In a letter to Stone earlier this week, NDP Leader John Horgan accused the government of "conducting closed-door negotiations to allow Uber to enter the B.C. market."

Horgan called on government to refer the issue of ridesharing to an all-party committee of the legislature this spring for a non-partisan debate.

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