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Taxi drivers protest Uber in Toronto last month. Toronto Mayor John Tory took the first step Monday toward regulating the ride-sharing service.

This seems to ignore the recent trend by major automobile manufacturers to allow leased vehicles to be shared. - cjk

TRANSPORTATION

Toronto takes step to craft taxi law amid Uber uproar

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It was, for Uber, a pretty standard week: executives arrested in Paris; drivers threatened in Johannesburg; in Calgary, a doughnut giveaway. But if the company can seem at times like chaos incarnate, in Toronto, signs of its endgame have begun to emerge.

Across Canada, Uber remains deeply controversial. Monday in Ottawa, anti-Uber cabbies threatened to take to the streets if the company wasn't brought to heel. In Montreal, Uber drivers have seen their cars impounded. In Vancouver, the entire business has been banned, at least temporarily. But in Toronto, Mayor John Tory took the first step Monday toward doing what all those cities will have to do eventually: regulate.

Following a court ruling Friday that denied the city's bid for an injunction against Uber, Tory vowed to overhaul Toronto's entire taxi regime. He promised a single bylaw that will cover taxis, limousines and ride-sharing services such as Uber and

its less successful competitor, Lyft.

"Our bylaws, which were written many years before technology advanced to where it is today, simply do not adequately capture the operations of companies like Uber," he said. "As a result, what we have today is not a level playing field."

Tory spoke to reporters after what one imagines was a tense meeting between taxi representatives, city officials and a senior Uber Canada employee. When the man from Uber tried to speak to reporters later, he was shouted down by the taxi lobby.

Tory said he hoped city staff could present options for a new law to council this fall. "We cannot have the Wild West," he said. "But we cannot also have a city which in some way ignores the march of technology and time."

An Ontario superior court judge ruled Friday that Uber — which connects independent drivers to passengers through a smartphone app — is not operating as a taxi brokerage in Toronto and is not violating local law. He denied the city's application for an injunction against the company.

While nominally a defeat for the city, the ruling paves the way for Tory to craft a regulatory solution that creates a better, more liberalized taxi market in Toronto.

Doing so, however, won't be easy. Toronto taxi drivers have already staged one large protest against Uber, shutting down the streets surrounding City Hall in May. Uber's entrance into the cloistered taxi market has caused similar strife in cities across Canada, and around the world. In Johannesburg, Uber drivers have been threatened and intimidated by metered taxi drivers, according to media reports.

In Paris, Uber shut down its French ride-sharing arm, Uber-Pop, last week following violent protests and the arrest of two executives on charges of running an illegal taxi service.

In Ottawa, a representative of the taxi industry met Monday with Mayor Jim Watson. Georges Chamoun demanded the city do more to crack down on Uber. If the company continued to operate as is, he said, drivers, fed up with lost fares and uneven competition, could take action.

"They're not listening to us

anymore, the drivers," Chamoun said. "We cannot control them anymore."

Taxi drivers and licence holders around the world have similar complaints about Uber. Many have invested hefty sums — sometimes in the mid six figures — to buy taxi plates. Most have to pay significant commercial insurance costs and other regulatory fees. In most cities, they also can't change their prices to meet market demand, like Uber can.

For Tory, Toronto city staff, and eventually policy-makers in most big Canadian cities, the challenge will be to craft laws that even the playing field while allowing Uber and similar services to flourish.

In his remarks Monday, Tory tried to strike a delicate balance. He acknowledged the "harsh" effects disruptive technology such as Uber has had on taxi drivers.

"We need to have that fair regulation," he said. "We need to have that one bylaw that applies to everybody."

He did not, however, give any clue yet as to how that regulation might work.