

The Problem with Bad Taxi Drivers

The Metropolitan Taxicab Commission says its regulations make taxis safer than Uber. But what happens when a driver shouldn't be on the road? → INCOMPLETE

by Mike Bollich-Ziegler

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When Carolyn asked her taxi driver to pull over during her December 15, 2014, ride to Lambert-St. Louis International Airport, he didn't respond.

"The driver was very sick. He was yelling, muttering, hitting the steering wheel and hitting himself in the head," she wrote in an email complaint to the St. Louis Metropolitan Taxicab Commission, or MTC. "I asked him if he was OK, and he started yelling at me. I asked him at least once to pull over and let me out of the cab but he didn't respond. It was raining that morning, so you can imagine how scared I was if I was willing to be left on the side of the road with my luggage on a rainy morning."

She called 911 to alert them of the driver. Upon her plane landing at its destination, she called Wilson Taxi Company to complain about her erratic cab ride. And then she emailed the MTC, which regulates taxi service in the St. Louis area.

The email detailing Carolyn's harrowing taxicab ride was among dozens of complaints submitted to the commission from January 1, 2014 through June 1, 2015. They include fare overcharging, dangerous driving, assault, stealing and other incidents. I received these complaints — a stack of nearly 215 pages — as well as the commission's responses after filing a public records request using Missouri's Sunshine Law.

Reached by email, Carolyn asked that we not use her full name, and declined to talk more about her experience — other than to say that she last heard from the taxi commission in January 2015, when it was seeking to revoke her driver's license. "That is also when I started using Uber or a private car service," she wrote. "No more cabs."

But what's noteworthy about Carolyn's correspondence with the MTC is that she was far from the first St. Louis rider to complain about her driver, Melesse Gelete.

By his own admission, Gelete has been a taxi driver in St. Louis for the last nineteen years. Records provided by the MTC chronicle more than a decade of his driving history. Since 2005, those documents show the commission has recorded numerous violations of its own code, dangerous driving complaints and documented mental health concerns against Gelete.

According to Gelete's driver info sheet record, four passengers filed complaints of erratic and unsafe driving during that time. He was also cited for fourteen violations of the vehicle-for-hire code and accumulated \$1,400 in fines and 27 points on his license. He was suspended for 135 days in addition to a temporary license suspension.



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- GRAPHIC BY BRITTANI SCHLAGER
- Click in to see a timeline of Gelete's record with the commission.

In 2010, the commission even added a notation to Gelete's file saying that he'd been charged with misdemeanor assault against a police officer in 2001 and convicted four years later.

Yet despite the long roster of violations, temporary suspensions and the conviction in criminal court, Gelete continued — legally — to drive a taxi in St. Louis. In fact, just two months before Carolyn's ride, another passenger

had complained to the MTC that her trip with Gelete "scared the hell out of me." The MTC gave Gelete just a five-day suspension and allowed him to return to the road.

In its bid to block Uber from the St. Louis market, the taxi commission has argued that its regulations are needed to keep drivers safe — that absent its background checks, which include fingerprints and drug tests, passengers are at risk. Uber's unwillingness to play by those rules, the commission has argued, is a real threat to public safety.

But Gelete's lengthy record of complaints suggest that the commission's efforts haven't always kept dangerous drivers off the road. They also suggest that even when drivers are punished, as Gelete eventually was, the companies that they work for are not held responsible for their actions.

In many ways, Gelete's case appears to be an outlier in terms of the number (and severity) of violations and complaints. But it still raises troubling questions about how the MTC deals with dangerous or disturbed drivers.

What does it take to permanently revoke a taxi driver's license in St. Louis? Does the commission even have that power? And in light of how many times Gelete returned as a taxi driver after paying a penalty or waiting out a temporary suspension, are the regulations governing drivers in the St. Louis area actually doing the job — or do they amount to no more than window dressing?

[REST MISSING 😞]