

## High-tech taxis take to city streets

By [Kim Leonard](#)  
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Yellow Cab driver John Morrison was heading to Pittsburgh International Airport to look for passengers one recent day when he saw a better opportunity on his satellite dispatch terminal.

People were waiting for cabs at three places in Dormont. All would be short trips, Morrison saw, but he was nearby so he punched in for the first one.

Eventually, "I got all three of them, 1,2,3, because I was on it," he said. "I made as much money as I would have made from the airport, in less time."

Technology in taxis no longer is limited to just a radio and a meter. Yellow Cab Co., whose parent is being sold to a French transportation conglomerate, is among about 15 major-city taxi services using full satellite dispatch to help drivers find and lock in trips, waste less fuel and minimize passengers' wait times.

The company also is installing security cameras to record action inside and outside its 305 cabs, fine-tuning its dispatch and customer service systems, adjusting service for a busier Downtown and continuing to expand its fleet.

Michael M. Edwards, president of the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership, welcomes the changes for Yellow Cab, part of the Pittsburgh Transportation Group.

Veolia Transportation, the North American business of Veolia Transport Worldwide of Paris, plans to acquire the local company for an undisclosed sum this month.

Now, to hail a taxi Downtown, "You kind of have to know where they are," Edwards said, referring to lines of cabs outside hotels, at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center and a few other areas. "It's fantastic, that there are going to be more cabs."

Edwards also hopes Yellow Cab lessens the longstanding frustration of finding a cab for a short trip. The company's drivers are independent contractors who lease their vehicles, as is typical in big cities, and many focus on getting lucrative, \$32-and-up trips to or from Pittsburgh International Airport.

Before global positioning systems were installed in each Yellow Cab vehicle, drivers could "book in" to one of 115 zones in the Pittsburgh area.

That invited problems. A driver in Carnegie would line up for a trip leaving from Downtown, for instance, then get an assignment to pick up someone at the Hilton, and sit in traffic for 40 minutes on the Parkway West.

Now, "The satellite looks down at the city, finds the cab closest to the call and it gives the call to that cab -- and only that cab," said Pittsburgh Transportation CEO James D. Campolongo, who'll remain CEO for five years while expanding his role with Veolia.

"A driver can't book into a zone if he's not there," he said, though they still can sign up for trips in the area where they're headed, with the system providing a set time to get there.

Drivers also can't race to steal each others' trips, after hearing an address over a radio. "It takes away that cowboy aspect. It helps you to be more professional," said Morrison, with six years of experience.

Campolongo has invested \$1.4 million in satellite dispatching since buying the company in 2002. That includes custom software that accounts for bridges and waterways, as it estimates travel times.

Yellow Cab has grown from 265 cabs a year ago to 305 now and could expand to 375. The company wants to add six posts to its 14 in the central business district, focusing Downtown and in busy areas such as the South Side and Strip District.

And in a year or so, as Downtown's population continues to rise and the Majestic Star casino opens on the North Shore, Yellow Cab will recruit some drivers to concentrate on short trips.

The changes have boosted service 11 percent in six years, Campolongo said, with Yellow Cab recording 1.2 million trips last year. Credit or debit transactions now pay for 60 percent of trips.

State Public Utility Commission records also show an overall drop in complaints it considers to be founded against the company, from 23 five years ago to 12 in 2006.

"We don't get complaints like we used to, that people couldn't get a cab or that it was late," said Craig Davis, vice president of sales and marketing for VisitPittsburgh.

The cameras, in about 20 cabs so far, record 15 seconds before and after sudden stops, for example, or if drivers activate them. All cabs will have them by September, Campolongo said, and the company has started to fit the vehicles with advanced terminals that show maps and give turn-by-turn directions.

As to customer service, employees at Yellow Cab's Manchester headquarters now can provide estimates of trip costs, and an automated system soon will phone them as they await their requested cabs, asking whether they still need service.

Once wireless technology evolves, passengers will be able to hail taxis using GPS antennae on their phones. And expect more upgrades later. "The sale will just give us more strength to make that part of the business even better," said Campolongo's brother Jerry, Yellow Cab's general manager.

Alfred LaGasse, CEO of the Taxicab Limousine & Paratransit Association, based in Rockville, Md., said New York taxis are trying backseat screens for credit payments. Some industry vendors are showing in-cab digital systems that display an ad for a local restaurant, for example, when the vehicle drives into that neighborhood.

And satellite dispatching is quickly becoming standard.

"Everybody saw Danny DeVito for years," LaGasse said, referring to the old "Taxi" comedy on TV. "They think all we do is drive around looking for passengers. Maybe in New York you can make a living that way, but in most cities you'd go broke buying gas."