

The Battle Over Empower: Affordability V.S Safety



Empower drivers and supporters protest outside Ira Aldridge Theater
(Photo: Tanaija Kee/ HUNewsService)

Washington- D.C.'s city officials have proposed a permanent ban on the Empower ride share app platform, dividing DMV residents due to safety. Some see the Empower ban as necessary for road safety, while others argue it restricts affordability and accessibility. The community stays divided in opinions as the deadline nears.

Empower is an app that works differently than Uber. They charge their drivers a monthly fee of \$250 instead of a commission per ride. This allows drivers to keep 100% of their fares and stay cheap for consumers. D.C.'s government recently banned Empower, refusing to get the proper licensing from the Department for Hire Vehicles (DFHV). After Empower already started racking up \$100 million in fines, a lawsuit and an investigation. Government officials have given them until March 5th to follow regulations or cease operation entirely. While city officials and have safety concerns, a few DMV residents have differing views. Some believe the ban protects D.C.'s customers, while others feel their drivers' lack of professionalism is the reason for cutting the app completely. As D.C residents look towards the app deadline, we must continue to ask what our consumers want for Empowers fate.

"I'm definitely for the app, but the owner is trying to circumvent the laws and protocols. This leads to more money for him but possibly less safety for passengers and drivers. Sadly, yes, if it

shuts down, it will hurt many people, but that lies squarely on the greed of the owner,” said Jay Clayton, a Mt. Pleasant resident.

For most Empower riders, affordability is the main reason they turn to Empower instead of Uber or Lyft. With rising prices on competitor apps, Empower is necessary; however, there have been arguments that the company is prioritizing fares at the expense of their passengers' safety.

John A Morris, a Deanwood resident and former Empower rider, stopped using the app after learning of their lack of regulations.

“I use Empower often. Upon doing my research, I discovered the owner refuses to register his company under the proper entity in DC so that Empower, and its drivers are regulated. It’s most definitely a safety issue. I will not use them until he complies.”

Many have acknowledged safety concerns about Empower drivers. A few residents worry that Empower drivers were previously removed from other rideshare platforms for violations.

Flona , a resident of Langley Park, expressed her concerns about the app after her failed experiences, “Yes, the prices are low, but at what cost? If you're in an accident, Empower takes no responsibility. I used the service for about 6 months. Most of the drivers drive recklessly and were previously kicked out of driving for Lyft/Uber for that very reason. I've not had a great experience with them,” she said.

However, some residents argue Empower is being unfairly targeted. Sinclair, a Mt. Pleasant resident, believes Empower should run under a rule set that differs from the other rideshare apps.

"Their legal argument may have merit. If they are only a platform and not a ride-share business, where drivers rent their services from, and they don't make any money from any rides, or not set any hours, should they fall under the regulatory requirements of a D.C. rideshare?" she said.

Other residents, like Casey Johnson from Lamond Riggs, see the ban as a part of a larger problem having to do with D.C.’s government regulations.

“Why should they not? [Be able to get away with not following the rules] It’s called disruption. Just means less margin for the multi-billion business and more money for the drivers... I’m not saying that regulations and standards of safety shouldn’t be met, nor should a company and owner be above the law, but let’s open the conversation about it,” he said.

Despite all the differing arguments, some riders are still indifferent about the potential shutdown. Bruce Jordan, a North Dupont resident, said the ban fortunately wouldn't affect him as much as others.

“What would the impact be to you and your family if Empower was shut down? If Empower is shut down, life for me will still go on. Not affected at all. You still have Lyft and Uber and, of course, taxis. The drivers have to pay Empower \$350 [\$250] a month to drive for them. If I'm correct, I could be wrong,” he said.



Protestors hold signs with sayings: 'Drivers Rights are Civil Rights' and 'Riders Support Empower' (Photo: Tanaija Kee/HUNewsService)

During Howard University's 158th Charter Day Convocation, where D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser was the keynote speaker, a protest took place outside Crampton Auditorium. Protestors advocated for Empower, saying that the platform gives better financial opportunities to drivers than Uber. Gavin Brown, a Howard Graduate and Empower driver, shared why he supports the app.

“I'm a Howard grad as well. I just started using it last year. This [Empower] is great part-time, while I'm trying to look in the job market. I work on the weekends, and I drive in the morning. This app pays my bills, its great money, and they support drivers, and it's more transparent,” he said.

An Empower representative, believes the ban is being pushed because Empower is a financial threat to Uber.

“Uber is trying to get rid of us because we're competition. Our cost is basically about half of what Uber is. Uber tells people their earned commission would be 70%. And then when you do

the math, it's like 40%, so they're keeping 60, and you get 40, when you're doing all the work,” he said.

As the DMV stays divided, some prioritize safety, others affordability and some question the actual reasoning behind the ban. Whether Empower will comply remains to be seen, despite the uncertain outcome of the Empower platform, residents are passionate about the fate of this service.