

The Power of One Entrepreneur

Hector Ricketts

Transportation Entrepreneur



A Publication of
The Institute for Justice
July 2010

“I knew we were right. We weren’t asking for welfare. We weren’t asking for loans. We weren’t asking for grants. We were creating an industry. We were creating a business—putting people in business, taking people to business.”



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The PO

Introduction

No one calls him Hector.

Not the drivers and owners of commuter vans—an industry he kept afloat in New York City by overcoming entrenched political opposition and harassment by enforcement agencies.

Not the 40,000 or more passengers who get to and from work each day using the commuter vans he helped organize in Queens and New York City's other four boroughs.

Not the owners of businesses like the Visiting Nurse Service of Staten Island or Hybrid Advertising in Crown Heights, Brooklyn,

A man in a blue suit and patterned tie stands in front of a dark van. In the background, there is a fence with barbed wire. The man is smiling slightly.

POWER OF ONE Entrepreneur

Hector Ricketts
Transportation Entrepreneur

Written by
Robert Heisler

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Asa Gauen

that could not operate without the van service that brings workers to clients or creates a market for advertisers to promote their own enterprise.

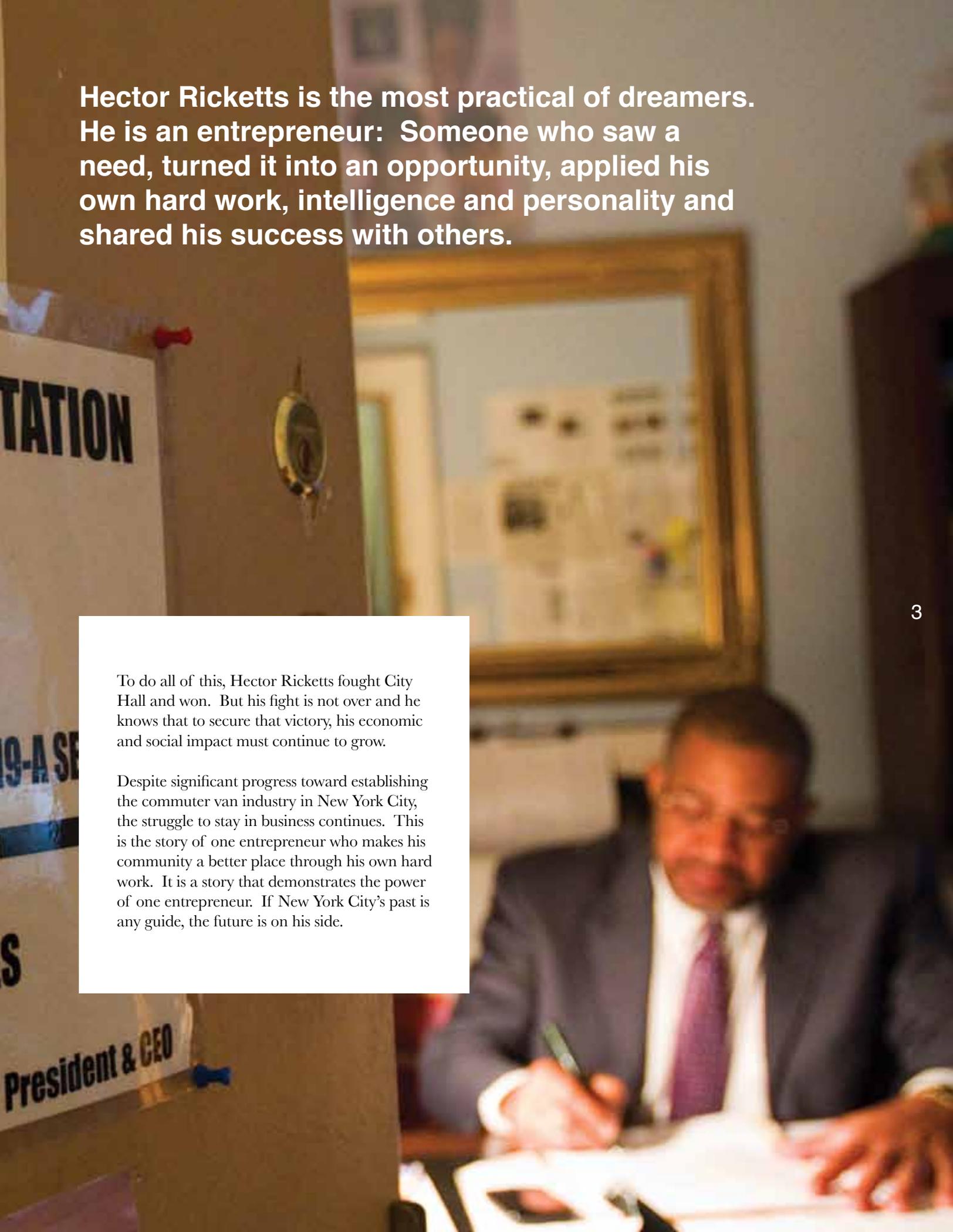
Not the owners and employees of businesses that took root and thrived in the protective shadow of the van business, businesses that serve ethnic groups on their journey to prosperity that is the story of New York City.

When people speak of Hector Ricketts, it's always Mr. Ricketts—not in deference to some great power or control he has that raises his status above them, but because they simply want to reflect the respect with which he has treated them, their hard work and their dreams.

Hector Ricketts is the most practical of dreamers. He is an entrepreneur: someone who saw a need, turned it into an opportunity, applied his own hard work, intelligence and personality, and shared his success with others—all the while facing down a bureaucracy full of barriers to build more opportunity and more success for himself and for many others.

He has been an entrepreneurial army of one for his business and his community for nearly 20 years. He has learned to speak the language of New York City politics to serve the hundreds of people who own or drive vans and the tens of thousands citywide who use vans to get to work.

Other van operators credit him with keeping the entire system afloat. The owners of businesses that developed with the support of the van business—garages, restaurants and an advertising agency, among many others—credit him with giving them the opportunity to work for themselves, provide jobs and deliver needed services to the community.



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To do all of this, Hector Ricketts fought City Hall and won. But his fight is not over and he knows that to secure that victory, his economic and social impact must continue to grow.

Despite significant progress toward establishing the commuter van industry in New York City, the struggle to stay in business continues. This is the story of one entrepreneur who makes his community a better place through his own hard work. It is a story that demonstrates the power of one entrepreneur. If New York City's past is any guide, the future is on his side.

“I realized this could be my future,” he says, so he worked to prepare for the city’s licensing process and overcome the many regulatory roadblocks the city put in the way of such van businesses.

The Quintessential New York Entrepreneur

4 From its start as a colony of the Dutch East India Company, New York has always been a beacon for immigrant hopes for a better life and has always rewarded those immigrant groups willing to work for those dreams. It has never been an easy ride from the old country to American success, but the story of New York has been the story of each immigrant group overcoming barriers set up by the political establishment and taking their place.

Hector Ricketts, born in Jamaica and living in a middle-class Queens neighborhood that has enjoyed a rebirth with the stability and achievements of its growing Caribbean and West Indian immigrants, recognizes that he is part of the 21st century American Dream. He holds a masters degree, is President and CEO of Community Transportation Systems (CTS), Inc., and President and CEO of Ricketts Consulting Group, and serves as a certified examiner for New York State’s Department of Motor Vehicles specializing in the certification of motor coach, limo, commuter van, school bus and ambulette driver licenses. Even with these achievements, his bona fides fail to capture the true extent of the man and the broad and positive influence of his work.

In the 1980s, Ricketts saw small vans dropping off patients where he worked at Freeport Hospital. In 1987, he bought his first van, a blue, 14-passenger Ford. He had it on the road for four weeks when a car ran a stop sign and hit the van and his hired driver. No one was hurt, but his blue van—and his side business—was totaled.

So he got a new van and started again, this time doing the driving. He would drive, work his shift and drive again.

In 1992, he was laid off by the hospital. While thinking about what to do to support his wife and three kids, he began driving full time and joined a company called Queens Van Plan.

“I realized this could be my future,” he says, so he worked to prepare for the city’s licensing process and overcome the many regulatory roadblocks the city put in the way of such van businesses. Ricketts recalls, “It was much more difficult then.”





“Nobody could get a license. The city council had the right to approve individual licenses. The Taxi and Limousine Commission and the Department of Transportation would approve putting vans on the street, and the city council—under the influence of the bus drivers’ union—simply intended to eliminate vans.”

This seemingly simple effort—to start his own transportation business—would launch him on a quest that has now lasted nearly 20 years—a quest not merely to earn an honest living in the occupation of his choice free from unreasonable government interference, but a quest to open up similar opportunities for entrepreneurs across New York City. Ricketts would take his fight to the courts of law and to the court of public opinion.

He scored important victories to keep the vans rolling and founded his own company that now has 30 vans on the street, employing 35 drivers—most of whom own their vans. Even after these achievements, he still works a regular shift every day behind the wheel of his 20-passenger vehicle. He is part of his own fleet that carries 6,000 riders per day. “I’m still a driver,” he says. “I don’t think I should be sitting in some cushy office while other owners are on the street.”

He takes his place among the Community Transportation Systems drivers for a 2 p.m. to 8 p.m. shift after a full day that starts at 7 a.m.—either in his one-room office on Hillside Avenue, a few blocks north of the main commuter van hub at Jamaica Center, or in an office that was once his oldest daughter’s bedroom in his Rosedale home. Before he hits the road, he has already spent hours maintaining his business, tending to the fragile but vital coalition of his colleagues and monitoring the running battle with the city council and regulatory agencies over the right of the commuter van owner/operators to make a living.

It is a battle Hector Ricketts is confident he will win, but only if he continues to work the No. 5 route between Jamaica Center and the Green Acres Mall just over the city line in Nassau County.

A Day in the Life of a Van Driver

What Mr. Ricketts faces is easy to see in his first run of the day.

His van, number 72, pulls up to the loading site on Parsons Boulevard at 1:36 p.m. Ricketts has removed his suit jacket, but sits in the driver's seat in his stripped shirt and tie. Smooth jazz plays on the radio.

Queens, a county of 2.6 million people that is one of New York City's five boroughs, has multiple "downtown hubs," where subway and bus lines cross. This early version of suburban sprawl is reflected in the city's public transportation system. The city's vital subway lines end in mid-Queens where, until 1997, a trip to work in Manhattan or most other places in the city required a bus ride to a subway station—what was called the two-fare zone. The addition of the Long Island Rail Road's Jamaica terminal complex made what is now marketed as Jamaica Center the place to meet transportation to work in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, too. The van-loading strip on Parsons Boulevard is just outside the Jamaica Center subway entrance.

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By 2:03, Van 72 is first in line and passengers climb on board. They are young people: Students from nearby York College, a senior college in the City University of New York system, going to work at the mall. High school students going home with back packs and water bottles. A few women at the end of their work day or coming back from a day of job hunting. A couple of regular riders walk to the back, talking in the Jamaica patois that makes their conversation at once animated and private. A dispatcher directs passengers who ask for the 11 route to a van closer to the corner of Jamaica Avenue.

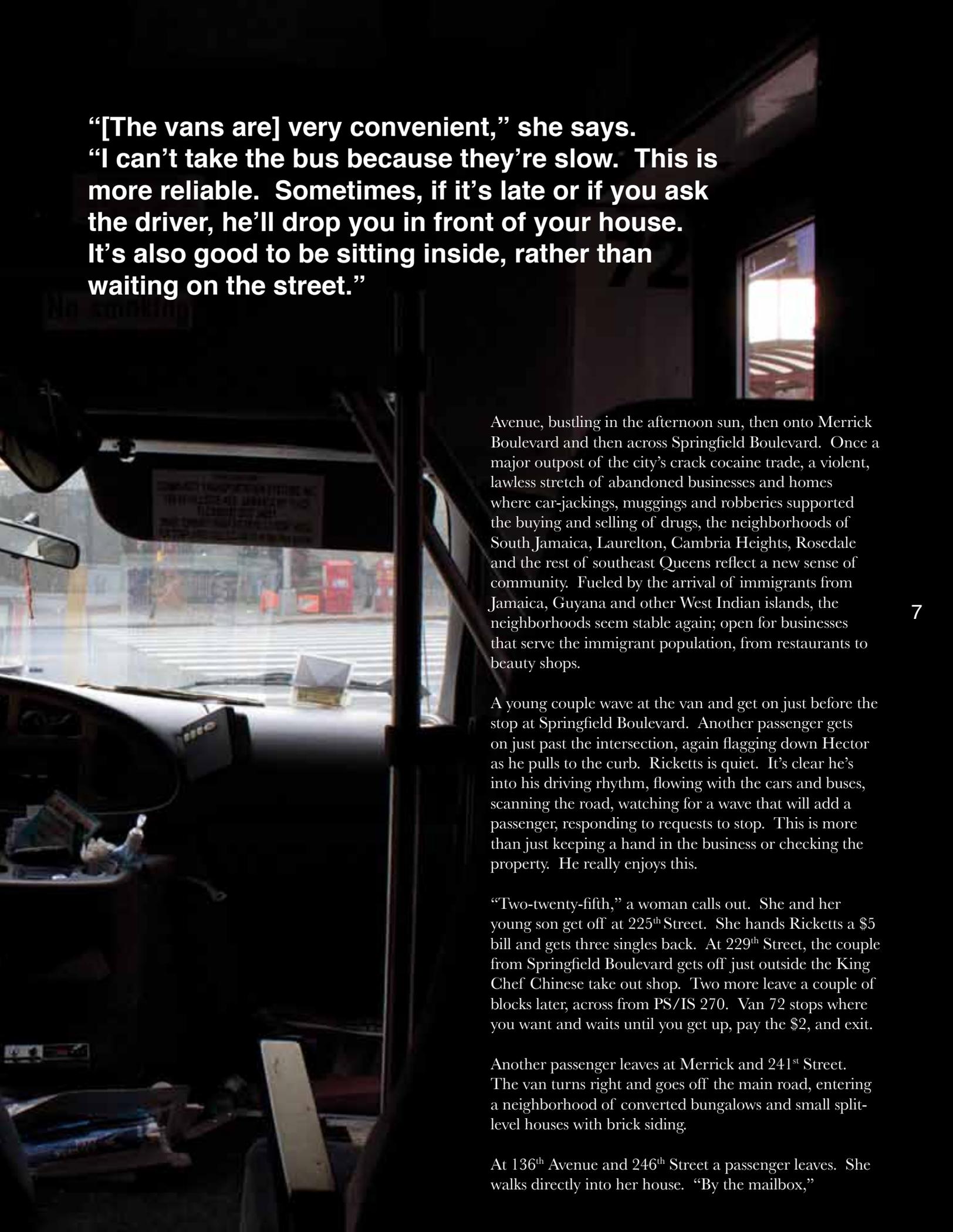
Helen Caldon smiles when she sees who is driving. The drivers are all good, she says, but she has her favorites and Mr. Ricketts is one of them. Caldon is a nurse at Kings County Hospital and takes the Long Island Rail Road from Jamaica to its Flatbush Avenue terminal in Brooklyn, followed by a subway ride. She lives in Laurelton and says she is a van passenger because it helps her keep her job.

"They're very convenient," she says. "I can't take the bus because they're slow. This is more reliable. Sometimes, if it's late or if you ask the driver, he'll drop you in front of your house. It's also good to be sitting inside, rather than waiting on the street."

On another run, Carmen White, who has been a nurse in Brooklyn for 19 years, explains why she pays an extra \$2 to be a loyal van rider: "The best-paying jobs require that you get to their work on time. Lateness will prevent you from achieving any kind of career. It doesn't matter how the city buses run; van passengers are getting service."

The doors close, but as Ricketts' van pulls out, it stops for a last-minute arrival. A right turn takes the 16 passengers onto Jamaica





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Avenue, bustling in the afternoon sun, then onto Merrick Boulevard and then across Springfield Boulevard. Once a major outpost of the city’s crack cocaine trade, a violent, lawless stretch of abandoned businesses and homes where car-jackings, muggings and robberies supported the buying and selling of drugs, the neighborhoods of South Jamaica, Laurelton, Cambria Heights, Rosedale and the rest of southeast Queens reflect a new sense of community. Fueled by the arrival of immigrants from Jamaica, Guyana and other West Indian islands, the neighborhoods seem stable again; open for businesses that serve the immigrant population, from restaurants to beauty shops.

A young couple wave at the van and get on just before the stop at Springfield Boulevard. Another passenger gets on just past the intersection, again flagging down Hector as he pulls to the curb. Ricketts is quiet. It’s clear he’s into his driving rhythm, flowing with the cars and buses, scanning the road, watching for a wave that will add a passenger, responding to requests to stop. This is more than just keeping a hand in the business or checking the property. He really enjoys this.

“Two-twenty-fifth,” a woman calls out. She and her young son get off at 225th Street. She hands Ricketts a \$5 bill and gets three singles back. At 229th Street, the couple from Springfield Boulevard gets off just outside the King Chef Chinese take out shop. Two more leave a couple of blocks later, across from PS/IS 270. Van 72 stops where you want and waits until you get up, pay the \$2, and exit.

Another passenger leaves at Merrick and 241st Street. The van turns right and goes off the main road, entering a neighborhood of converted bungalows and small split-level houses with brick siding.

At 136th Avenue and 246th Street a passenger leaves. She walks directly into her house. “By the mailbox,”

It is Van 72's first roundtrip of the day: Twenty-six passengers at \$2 per head for a little less than an hour of drive time. Pretty routine.

Totally illegal, Hector Ricketts explains.

another passenger says just after Hook Creek Boulevard. There are no street signs on his corner. As the van turns left onto South Conduit Avenue, a busy street larger than most boulevards, the next-to-last stop is outside a KFC.

Everyone else waits until the van crosses the county line and enters the Green Acres Mall. The parking space says "for licensed cars only." The commuter van business is welcome here, Ricketts says. Private business knows the value of a service that delivers its employees and customers and brings them home or close to it.

By 2:23, the return trip begins with six passengers including a group of four women. The riders are older. No shopping bags. For the first time, Spanish is spoken. Before the bus leaves mall property, a shopper waves it down. Another gets on outside the Best Buy. At a red light, a woman steps out from a bus shelter, waves the door open and gets on.

Traffic grows thick; schools are getting out. In front of a nail and hair salon at 242nd Street, the bus gains a passenger, and then loses one at 218th Street. Everyone knows the fare. Most say thank you to the driver, who tells them they are welcome. At Springfield Boulevard one passenger gets on, one gets off. The van completes its run, dropping nine people at Archer Avenue, outside the State University of New York/Queens EOC employment center. Most head for the subway.

Hector contacts his dispatcher and puts Van 72 back on the ready list. When its number comes up, the dispatcher will call it to Parsons Boulevard. Until then, the van and its driver will wait in a layover zone south of the railroad tracks. He will make some phone calls, check on the status of a meeting or two, get reviews from the last coalition gathering and wait for the next run.

It is Van 72's first roundtrip of the day: Twenty-six passengers at \$2 per head for a little less than an hour of drive time. Pretty routine.

Totally illegal, Hector Ricketts explains.

Making Outlaws of Honest Entrepreneurs

“Any time along the run a police officer could have pulled us over, stopped the van, walked on board and issued six or eight or 12 tickets,” Ricketts says. It’s just a matter of fact. It happens every day, some days worse than others.

According to the city regulations for commuter vans, Van 72 violated the law by:

- Driving on a street used by a city bus.
- Picking up a passenger on a street used by a city bus.
- Stopping to pick up a passenger before reaching its terminus.
- Dropping off a passenger on a street used by a city bus.
- Stopping to drop off a passenger before reaching its terminus.
- Failing to maintain a manifest containing the names and addresses of every passenger carried on that run.

In short, the city bans the very services the riding public needs.

“To be legal and comply with the local law regarding van services, an owner is prohibited from riding on bus routes, even though in Queens, that’s the only way to get to where we want to go,” Ricketts says. In Queens, buses run along nearly every two-way street. The key commercial thoroughfares—how people move from neighborhood to neighborhood in a borough underserved by the city’s subway system—have stops for more than one bus line. “And we can’t stop along that route. Anything from the first stop to the last is against regulations.”

It is a formula that will be repeated often in conversations with drivers, passengers and others familiar with the van business.

Those last two violations, according to the unanimous report of van owners and operators, push enforcement into harassment. They are most often tacked onto the pile of summonses whether or not the driver has all the papers and stickers in order and on display.



Tell it to the judge, they are told. Bring them to court with you, and the tickets will be dismissed.

Drivers do, and the tickets usually are, they say. But the cost has already been paid. Drivers who must go to court to fight their tickets are not on the road. Their vans are not on the road. The paperwork piles up. Drivers who are also van owners—and most are—receive a second set of tickets, doubling the cost of each infraction. Drivers can receive eight violations or 16 tickets in a single stop. Yet, Ricketts says, for most authorized commuter vans, the only ticket that can stand up in New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission (TLC) court is the bus route violation. (The TLC was created in 1971 and regulates more than 50,000 vehicles, such as taxis and commuter vans, as well as approximately 100,000 drivers within the city.)

“A police officer has to testify that he saw that you did two illegal functions; you have to drop off *and* pick up in the sight of the officer,” he says. “The reality is it doesn’t matter. You’ll get tickets anyway if you’re stopped by police while driving on a street that is also used as a bus route.”

The police officers or Taxi and Limousine enforcement agents who issue those tickets are seen—at best—as agents of a city government that heavily subsidizes a money-losing MTA bus service and, under political pressure from the MTA bus driver’s union, has set up the commuter van business to fail. One van company operator, Lateef Ayala, calls it exploiting democracy to preserve a government-run monopoly.

But it is more than that, they say, because the commuter van industry is almost exclusively run and operated by a new generation of immigrants and serves almost exclusively new immigrant



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neighborhoods. They are the latest immigrants to run up against the entrenched interest of earlier immigrants who now control the wheels of political power.

Cast in that light, Ricketts’ efforts are easily understood.

The city’s actions against the van drivers are less sympathetic. What if New York City owned supermarkets and prevented Korean greengrocers or Hispanic bodega owners from staying open when the supermarkets were closed—or forbade them from selling cereal because supermarkets sold cereal? And who would stand for it if the city prevented pediatricians from treating children over the age of six because city hospitals needed the business?

The harassment of unfair enforcement, owners and drivers say, is the latest government barrier to earning a living through their hard work. Ending that harassment and changing the law that allows it is Hector Ricketts’ latest challenge. It is the challenge with which Hector Ricketts starts every day.

“Government makes it easier to get on welfare than to grow my business,” Ricketts says. “They have a program in place for welfare, but to grow my business? There is no interest. There is a desire to stop me from growing.”

Ricketts and his first organization, Queens Van Plan, were the lead plaintiff in *Ricketts v. New York City*, the 1997 lawsuit filed by the Institute for Justice, a public interest law firm, seeking to overturn the rules that prohibited “hard-working men and women from providing safe, efficient and inexpensive van service to passengers who hail them from the street.” The suit contended that these laws unconstitutionally restricted the ability of bootstrap capitalists to earn an honest living and denied Brooklyn and Queens residents access to adequate transportation.

When the five-year quest ended, van operators got half a loaf of justice: The city was ordered to make official licenses more available, bringing new owners into the business, but

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the rules governing how commuter vans should operate were left in place. That being said, the victory scored by Ricketts and his van drivers was enough to keep the vans rolling. Since then, an uneasy unofficial accommodation stands in the streets served by commuter vans: Meet all the city and state regulations, but serve the public at your own financial and legal peril while the city continues to favor and subsidize a money-losing public bus system.

Courts view these restrictions as within the city's right to regulate public transportation. Ricketts is clear about the consequences: "The effect is to make every van driver—an independent, entrepreneurial, small businessman serving his largely minority community—a scofflaw or a criminal."

Here's how the TLC regulations put it: "A commuter van driver shall keep the passenger manifest ... in the van and shall enter the name of each passenger to be picked up legibly in ink prior to the boarding of each passenger. A commuter van driver shall not provide transportation service to a passenger unless such service is on the basis of a telephone contract or other prearrangement and such prearrangement is evidenced by the records required."

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"We have to operate like a charter service," Hector says. "Passengers are expected to pre-arrange rides. A passenger manifest must be kept in the van with names, addresses and telephone numbers of the riders."

Ricketts' commuter van association has been working with—though sometimes he'll say working on—legislators in the city council and in Albany to change those regulations. Their goal:

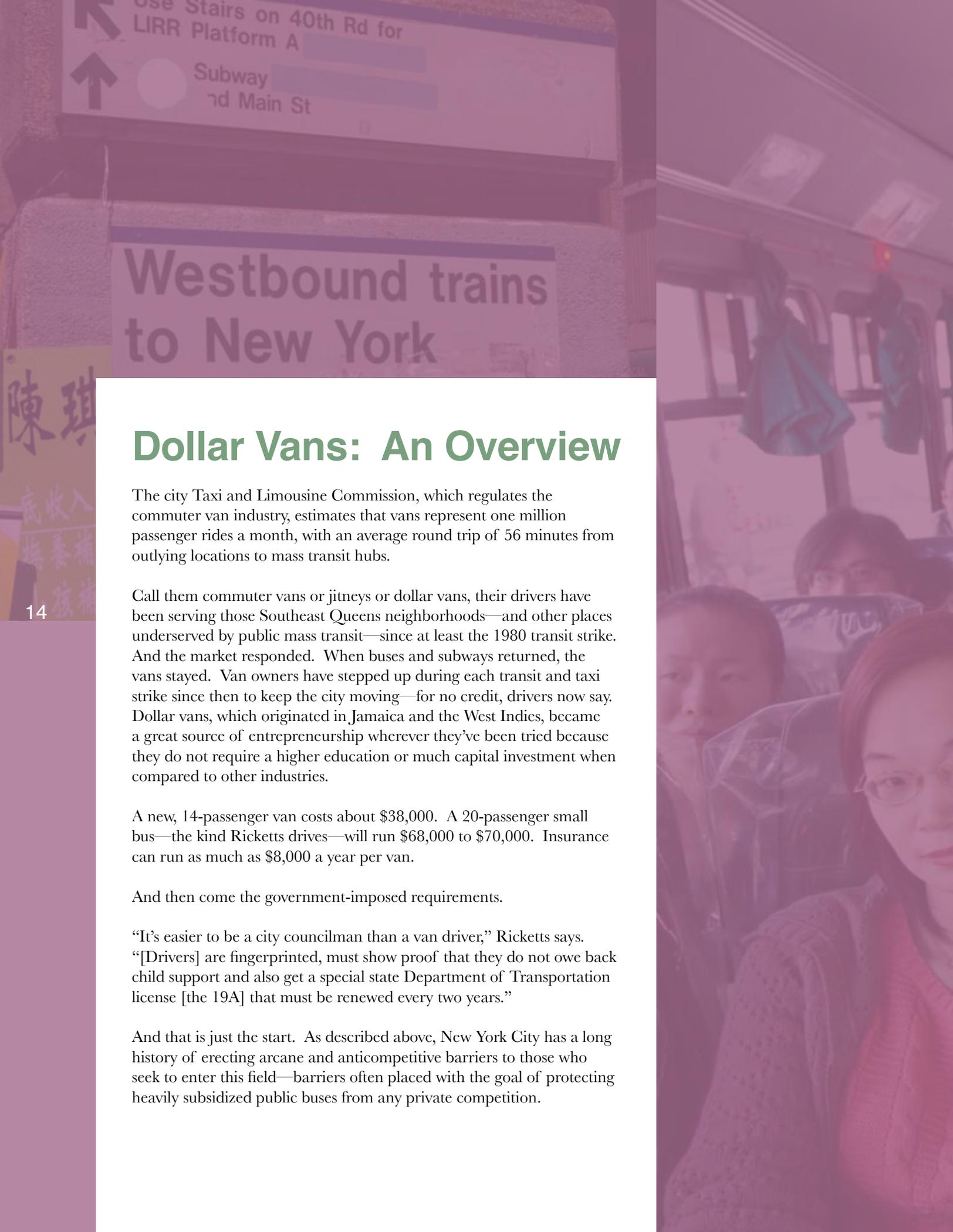
- to give drivers the right to use the city's major streets,
- to eliminate the need to have riders sign a roster, and
- to be able to accept street hails.

The opposition, largely from allies of the Transportation Workers Union who see commuter vans as competition for fares, has been effective, but the tide is turning, he says. "The council's transportation committee is working on a passenger's bill of rights we hope will eliminate manifests."

Ricketts has learned enough in his years of grassroots lobbying to frame the argument by setting the definitions: "What question should the government be asking?" he asks. "How do you promote bus use or how do you serve the people's needs?"

And the answer, he says, should come from this foundation of belief: Let the marketplace decide. If the marketplace can accommodate both forms of transportation, why can't the city?





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Dollar Vans: An Overview

The city Taxi and Limousine Commission, which regulates the commuter van industry, estimates that vans represent one million passenger rides a month, with an average round trip of 56 minutes from outlying locations to mass transit hubs.

Call them commuter vans or jitneys or dollar vans, their drivers have been serving those Southeast Queens neighborhoods—and other places underserved by public mass transit—since at least the 1980 transit strike. And the market responded. When buses and subways returned, the vans stayed. Van owners have stepped up during each transit and taxi strike since then to keep the city moving—for no credit, drivers now say. Dollar vans, which originated in Jamaica and the West Indies, became a great source of entrepreneurship wherever they've been tried because they do not require a higher education or much capital investment when compared to other industries.

A new, 14-passenger van costs about \$38,000. A 20-passenger small bus—the kind Ricketts drives—will run \$68,000 to \$70,000. Insurance can run as much as \$8,000 a year per van.

And then come the government-imposed requirements.

“It’s easier to be a city councilman than a van driver,” Ricketts says. “[Drivers] are fingerprinted, must show proof that they do not owe back child support and also get a special state Department of Transportation license [the 19A] that must be renewed every two years.”

And that is just the start. As described above, New York City has a long history of erecting arcane and anticompetitive barriers to those who seek to enter this field—barriers often placed with the goal of protecting heavily subsidized public buses from any private competition.

A photograph showing the interior of a van with several passengers. The van has blue curtains on the windows and overhead handrails. The passengers are of various ages and ethnicities, some looking towards the camera. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter.

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Dollar Vans Put People to Work and Take People to Work

Dollar vans like those directed by Hector Ricketts not only put people to work, but they also take people to work. They provide the owner/operators with a reliable means of providing for themselves and their families while at the same time providing low-income and predominantly minority patrons safe and reliable transportation to and from work.



Putting People to Work

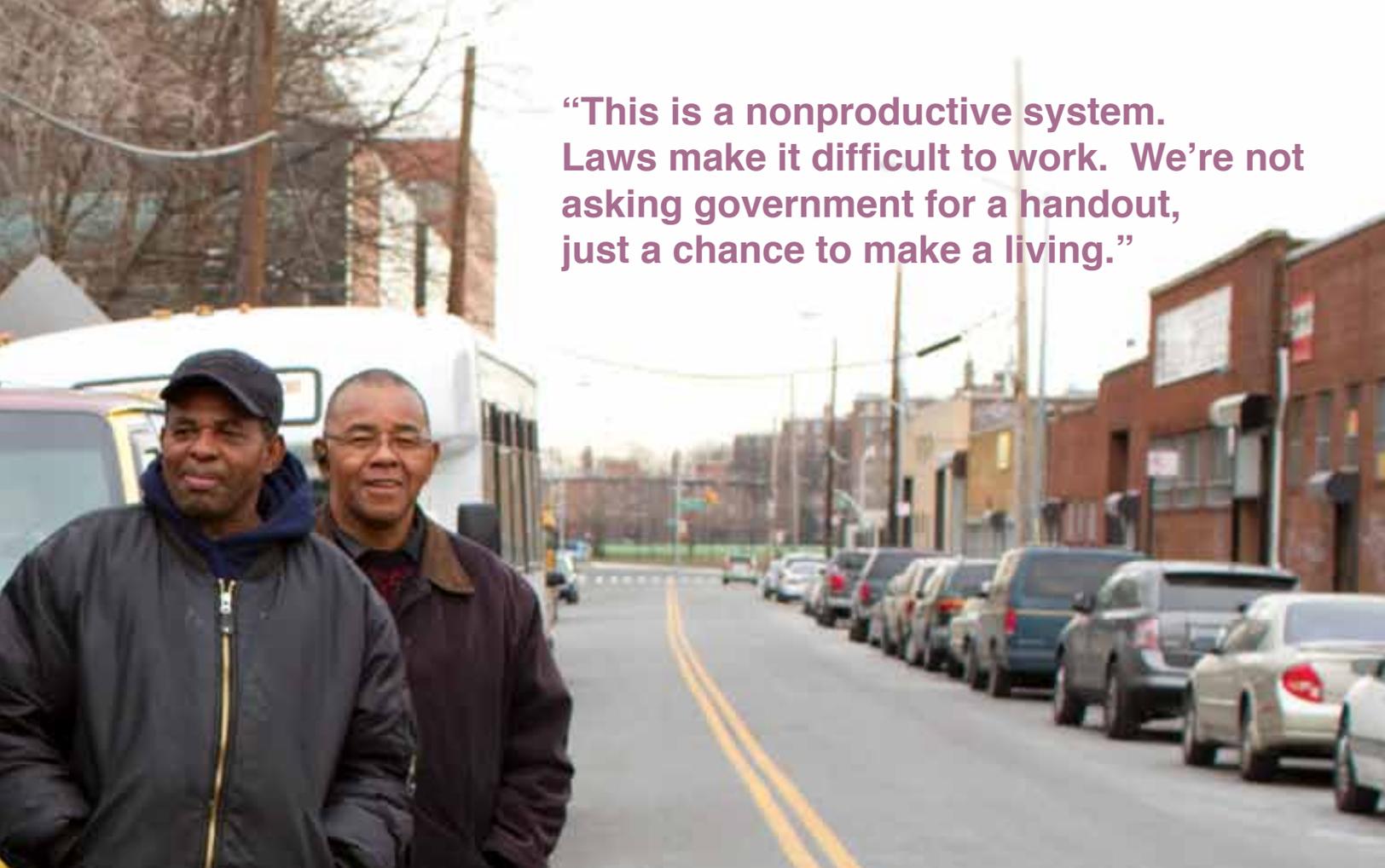
Dwight Morrison is an owner/driver in the CityLink Corp. and an example of Hector Ricketts' impact on his community. You will catch Morrison sounding just like the boss, but the differences suggest Ricketts' contribution is more than just providing good jobs for willing workers; it is also bringing those workers into the responsibilities of business ownership.

“Mr. Ricketts is doing a tremendous job—at first because he was able to organize people to be responsible, to keep their obligations. I give him an A-plus. He uses his articulateness and his knowledge to reach out—not by force or aggression—on behalf of hardworking people. He is a recognized leader based on the way he carries himself, the way he speaks.

“He tells people: Don't come into this business as a hustler. This is a job; get your license. He set the rules that govern the business. To use dispatchers. To be courteous to passengers. To treat buses with respect, too.

“So you abide by these rules. But when a cop stops a van going from point A to point B, it gets hard to see why we're in this business. Who is a van driver transporting? Criminals? No. The people who go to the city to keep the city that never sleeps running.”

Morrison, a former patrolman from outside Kingston, Jamaica, has been driving since 1999. Before he bought his van, he unloaded trucks at Caldor's (now Target) for \$6 an hour, worked for a temp agency doing labor and worked for UPS cleaning trucks at night. “I just wanted to work. We (the West Indian community) did not come here to sit on our stoops in the middle of the day, chilling, harassing passersby and drinking a 40.”



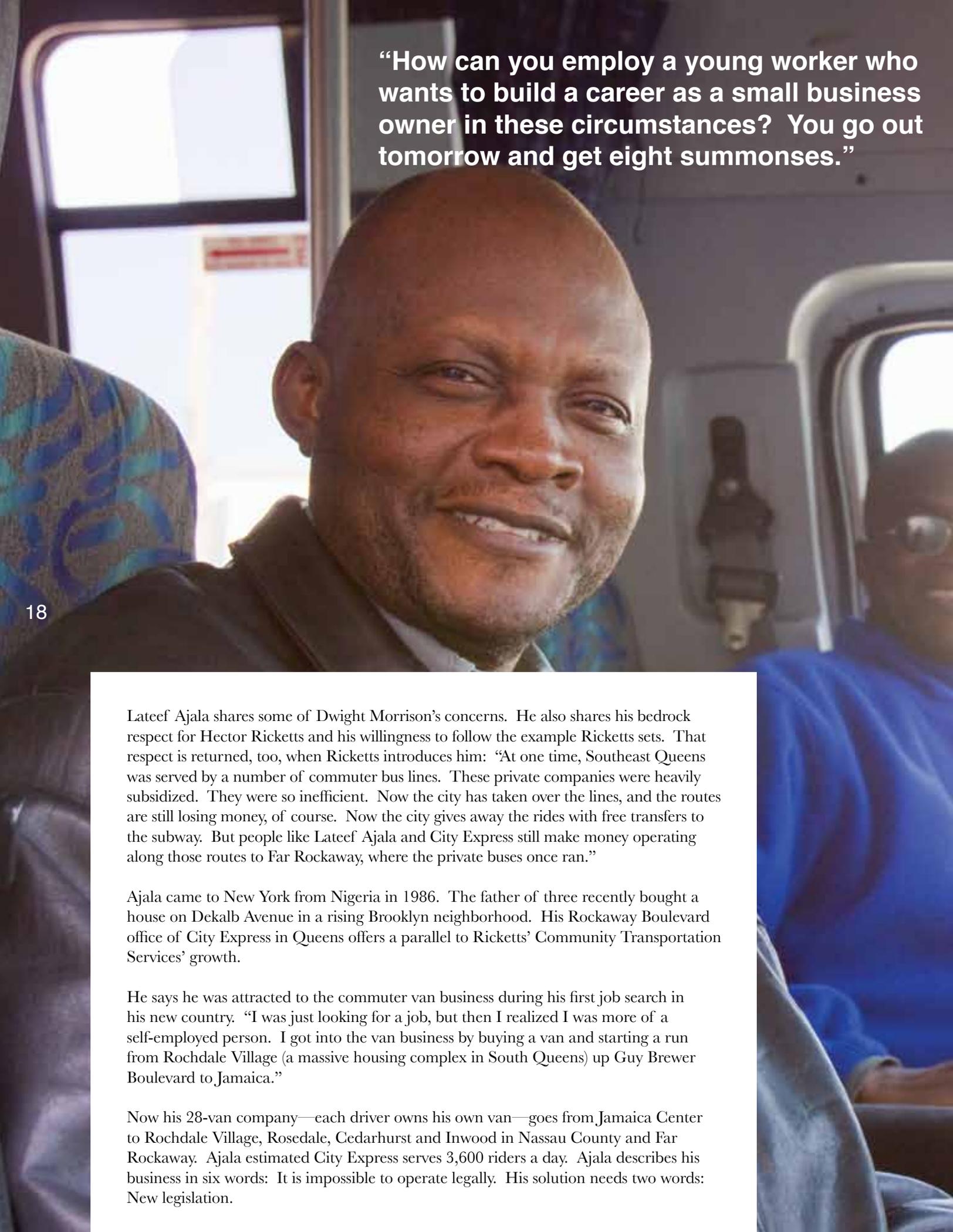
“This is a nonproductive system. Laws make it difficult to work. We’re not asking government for a handout, just a chance to make a living.”

Morrison is married, with two children. Here is his weekday schedule: up at 5 a.m. (his wife wakes him), bathe, dress, tea, if he has time. “I have to get out there,” he says. He’s back at 8:30 a.m. to take his daughter to school and his wife to the train. Then back to work. There is flexibility in the work schedule. If he needs to go to the laundromat, the supermarket, he can work around his life. It enables his wife to work in Manhattan.

He says of the regulatory burden he faces, “This is a nonproductive system. Laws make it difficult to work. We’re not asking government for a handout, just a chance to make a living. This is how we get around: Every day, the police can arrest me. I face criminal charges based on not appearing for traffic-related summonses.”

He says, “[New York Mayor Michael] Bloomberg, I thought would be more sympathetic. We are providing jobs. We are getting people in our community to connections that get them to work on time. We’re buying vans from Ford, which keeps other workers employed. We use local mechanics. We buy gas every day at local gas stations. The restaurants we go to help stabilize the community. We support the tire shops, the insurance companies. We are breaking our backs, working under pressure six days a week,” he says. But it is not the work that makes him angry. It is, he says, the hypocrisy. “We can spend our lives legally generating revenue then giving it all to the city in the form of fines.

“Mr. Ricketts wants a chance to change things, to play by the rules and be rewarded for it, or at least not continually harassed. ‘Just give me a chance,’ he says. We have already made a couple of steps. Give me a chance to reason with them. Out of respect for Mr. Ricketts, we’re not going to the streets and protesting. The mayor just needs to know we’re all being pinched very hard.”



“How can you employ a young worker who wants to build a career as a small business owner in these circumstances? You go out tomorrow and get eight summonses.”

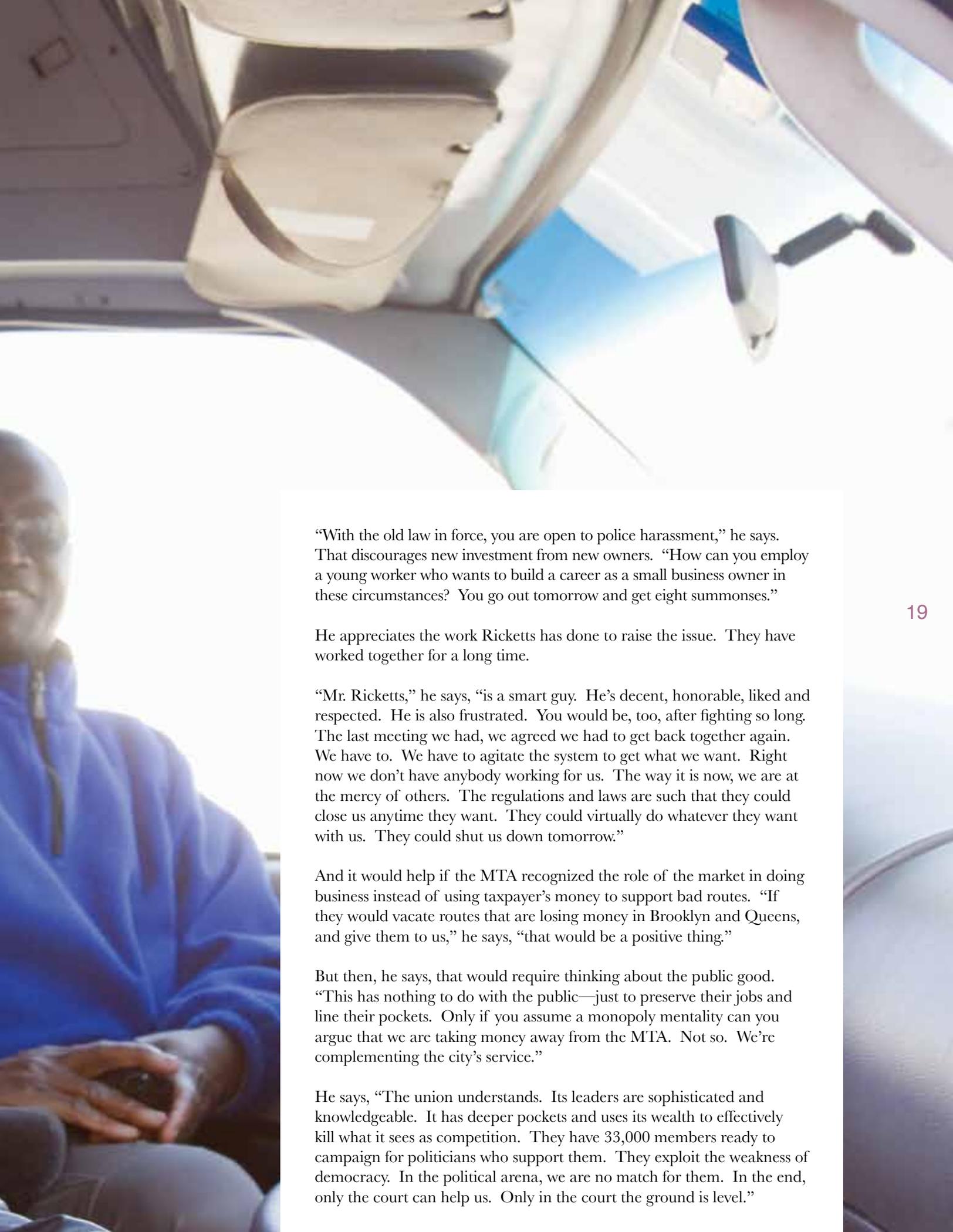
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Lateef Ajala shares some of Dwight Morrison’s concerns. He also shares his bedrock respect for Hector Ricketts and his willingness to follow the example Ricketts sets. That respect is returned, too, when Ricketts introduces him: “At one time, Southeast Queens was served by a number of commuter bus lines. These private companies were heavily subsidized. They were so inefficient. Now the city has taken over the lines, and the routes are still losing money, of course. Now the city gives away the rides with free transfers to the subway. But people like Lateef Ajala and City Express still make money operating along those routes to Far Rockaway, where the private buses once ran.”

Ajala came to New York from Nigeria in 1986. The father of three recently bought a house on Dekalb Avenue in a rising Brooklyn neighborhood. His Rockaway Boulevard office of City Express in Queens offers a parallel to Ricketts’ Community Transportation Services’ growth.

He says he was attracted to the commuter van business during his first job search in his new country. “I was just looking for a job, but then I realized I was more of a self-employed person. I got into the van business by buying a van and starting a run from Rochdale Village (a massive housing complex in South Queens) up Guy Brewer Boulevard to Jamaica.”

Now his 28-van company—each driver owns his own van—goes from Jamaica Center to Rochdale Village, Rosedale, Cedarhurst and Inwood in Nassau County and Far Rockaway. Ajala estimated City Express serves 3,600 riders a day. Ajala describes his business in six words: It is impossible to operate legally. His solution needs two words: New legislation.



“With the old law in force, you are open to police harassment,” he says. That discourages new investment from new owners. “How can you employ a young worker who wants to build a career as a small business owner in these circumstances? You go out tomorrow and get eight summonses.”

He appreciates the work Ricketts has done to raise the issue. They have worked together for a long time.

“Mr. Ricketts,” he says, “is a smart guy. He’s decent, honorable, liked and respected. He is also frustrated. You would be, too, after fighting so long. The last meeting we had, we agreed we had to get back together again. We have to. We have to agitate the system to get what we want. Right now we don’t have anybody working for us. The way it is now, we are at the mercy of others. The regulations and laws are such that they could close us anytime they want. They could virtually do whatever they want with us. They could shut us down tomorrow.”

And it would help if the MTA recognized the role of the market in doing business instead of using taxpayer’s money to support bad routes. “If they would vacate routes that are losing money in Brooklyn and Queens, and give them to us,” he says, “that would be a positive thing.”

But then, he says, that would require thinking about the public good. “This has nothing to do with the public—just to preserve their jobs and line their pockets. Only if you assume a monopoly mentality can you argue that we are taking money away from the MTA. Not so. We’re complementing the city’s service.”

He says, “The union understands. Its leaders are sophisticated and knowledgeable. It has deeper pockets and uses its wealth to effectively kill what it sees as competition. They have 33,000 members ready to campaign for politicians who support them. They exploit the weakness of democracy. In the political arena, we are no match for them. In the end, only the court can help us. Only in the court the ground is level.”



It is a Friday, just past 7:30 a.m., and van driver Donovan Samuda is working his way to Atlantic Avenue as it turns from Queens to Brooklyn for his first pickups. His maroon van features two pictures of his daughter taped to the dashboard.

The nurses' aides he usually meets in Queens are off today. His is a custom-crafted service because the nurse service schedule and roster changes nearly every day. The number and location of pickups depends on the Staten Island Visiting Nurses Association (VNA) schedule. This is the rare case when commuter vans can work from a manifest. He has names, addresses and telephone numbers. Drivers have to coordinate with aides, the agency and the needs of the patients.

Downtime and distance guarantee that a driver will know who is on his route, when their assignments change and when their lives change. There are adjustments every day; one patient has a doctor's appointment and won't be home for an hour, another has to accommodate his son's shopping for groceries.

20

The downtime gives Samuda a chance to consider how, for all the complaining and all the struggle, the opportunity Ricketts gives him has changed his life. Encouraging him to buy his own van made the biggest difference to Samuda, who left the van business two years ago to drive a bus for the MTA. When a minor accident during probation cost him the city job, he still had his van and still had Ricketts' warm welcome.

Samuda and the other drivers agree that the support Ricketts provides—from getting licensed to guiding them on accurate recordkeeping and reminders to maintain their vans—has meant being able to live in a safer, more stable neighborhood and keep his family growing. It means a lot, Samuda says, when children see their fathers going off to work every day and when they see that work putting food on the table. It is clear that Ricketts is his community's example of how hard work, courtesy and attention to detail pay off.

Taking People to Work

Hector Ricketts also provides an example of how even level ground can contain potholes.

After cutting through copious red tape, Ricketts says he once secured a contract—a good contract—with the city to take welfare recipients to work. The idea was to remove one barrier for someone who wanted to work and leave the welfare rolls. (And, apparently, the city's Department of Labor did not trust either its clients or the city's public transportation system to get to work on time.) It was a good match, he says, that fit the CTS promise of creating jobs by taking people who wanted to work to their jobs. But what he calls "red tape and bureaucratic nonsense" quickly killed the program. For example, he says, his company was not allowed to show a profit on the service. Getting paid was slow in coming and laboriously handled through the city's comptroller's office.



Samuda and the other drivers agree that the support Ricketts provides has meant being able to live in a safer, more stable neighborhood and keep his family growing.

That experience makes his work with the Visiting Nurses Association of Staten Island in the private sector even more rewarding. Two CTS vans bring VNA employees from Queens and Brooklyn to work each morning on New York's most remote borough and take them home each night. The VNA of Staten Island checked to ensure Ricketts' company, its drivers and vehicles were registered and insured, and met public health and safety standards, then gave him the contract and paid him every two weeks with a reasonable profit.

"I'm proud of the guys who are doing it," Ricketts says. If not for the drivers like Donovan Samuda, "those nurses and aides could not work and the Visiting Nurse Service would not have enough nurses to deliver care to their clients."

Audrey Penney, VNASI's executive vice president and chief operating officer, confirms that simple statement, but says Ricketts leaves out the most important part of the equation: His own involvement.

Without Ricketts' work, his daily phone calls and monitoring, Staten Island's primary home healthcare service could serve far fewer than the 400 families on their roster, Penney says. A new program to help older residents stay in their homes rather than enter expensive care facilities is just one result of being able to hire workers who live in Brooklyn and Queens.

The problem wasn't a shortage of nurses, she says, but a shortage of affordable transportation. "No home healthcare professional can afford to go over the [Verrazano] Bridge from Brooklyn," she says. "We would have to turn down referrals from hospitals and doctors."

She told her vice president for business development, Barrington Burke-Green, that nurses were simply unable to take jobs. "He told me: 'I want you to meet someone.'" That someone was Hector Ricketts. Burke-Green, who lives in the same Hollis, Queens, neighborhood served by Ricketts' vans, turned to a solution familiar to him while growing up in Kingston, Jamaica.

Ricketts impressed Penny with his understanding of the logistics involved and his willingness to provide door-to-door service on the island. A pilot program quickly grew to carry dozens of home healthcare workers across the bridge.

One regular rider is Shawnda Leander, who gets on at Pennsylvania Avenue and Liberty Avenue, at the edge of the East Brooklyn Industrial Park. She has been in America for 16 years from Guyana, living in a tough, poor neighborhood called East New York. She and Samuda tease each other. "You're late," she says. "You should live closer," he says. Immediately, the conversation turns to the news with a sense that every morning the headlines are digested in the maroon van on its way to Staten Island.

At Utica Avenue and Empire Boulevard, Veronica Morgan gets on carrying a suitcase. She is relieving another nurse and staying over the weekend with her client—she likes this client because she waits with her when it is time for her pick up. She brings her own pillow and sheets.



When Ricketts talks about the success of the Staten Island program among the many other business opportunities he sees, he always adds that his van industry could and should play a larger role in meeting transportation needs of city residents.

The two vans meet at the edge of Prospect Park, outside the Parkside subway station. Here the passengers are redistributed according to their destinations. Samuda checks the manifest with Hubert “Super” Henry and the division is made—eight on the other van, five with Samuda. They picked up 13 passengers; two others are on the manifest, but the no-shows may have found other ways to get there today.

The last pick up is at 49th Street and Ft. Hamilton. They pass McKinley Park onto the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway and over the Verrazano Bridge across New York Bay to Staten Island. Samuda’s van heads into residential neighborhoods, all private homes.

The first drop-off is at 8:58 a.m. The aide left her Coney Island apartment at 6:45 a.m. to make her connection, but, she says, without the van her route to work would take nearly four hours—three subways to the Manhattan ferry dock and a bus ride after crossing the harbor to Staten Island. She would have to look for another job, and that’s more difficult than waking up before dawn.

The van goes down Hyland Boulevard, a main route through the island. Samuda glances at his navigation system, but he knows the borough well enough to freelance off its directions as he criss-crosses the territory. Leander gets off at Colonial Square, a townhouse development. Samuda carefully snakes his way back out to Hyland. Today, he must double back along the run to drop off Louise Brown, who cannot go to the client’s house until 10 a.m. That’s when the door opens for her.

Most regular shifts for VNA employees last four hours—time enough to take care of the client’s health and safety needs and to provide some respite to the family. Samuda goes through the historic Richmond Town settlement a couple of times before returning to pick up Veronica Morgan, who has no afternoon cases and wants to be dropped off at the bus terminal to go back to Brooklyn. No sense staying around for her colleagues’ afternoon shifts to end, so she takes the bus. She is late leaving the house because she has to wait until her patient’s son returns from the pharmacy to relieve her.

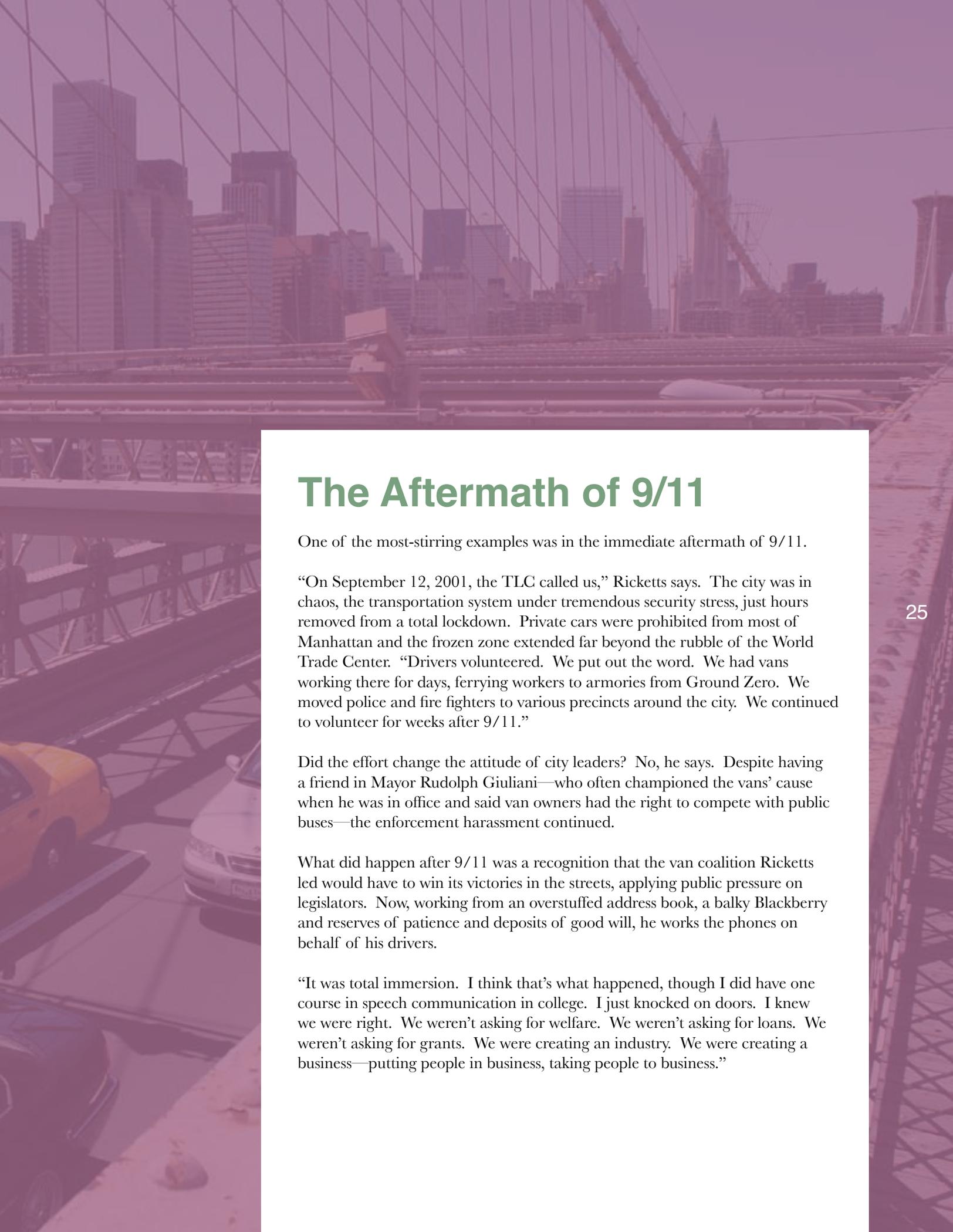
When Ricketts talks about the success of the Staten Island program among the many other business opportunities he sees, he always adds that his van industry could and should play a larger role in meeting transportation needs of city residents.



Provide New and Vital Services to New York City

Time and again since their founding during the transit strike of 1980, the commuter vans have demonstrated their good will and value to the city. Yet, time and again, that courtesy has never been returned to Ricketts or the van industry he helps lead.

“Drivers volunteered. We put out the word. We had vans working there for days, ferrying workers to armories from Ground Zero. We moved police and fire fighters to various precincts around the city. We continued to volunteer for weeks after 9/11.”



The Aftermath of 9/11

One of the most-stirring examples was in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

“On September 12, 2001, the TLC called us,” Ricketts says. The city was in chaos, the transportation system under tremendous security stress, just hours removed from a total lockdown. Private cars were prohibited from most of Manhattan and the frozen zone extended far beyond the rubble of the World Trade Center. “Drivers volunteered. We put out the word. We had vans working there for days, ferrying workers to armories from Ground Zero. We moved police and fire fighters to various precincts around the city. We continued to volunteer for weeks after 9/11.”

Did the effort change the attitude of city leaders? No, he says. Despite having a friend in Mayor Rudolph Giuliani—who often championed the vans’ cause when he was in office and said van owners had the right to compete with public buses—the enforcement harassment continued.

What did happen after 9/11 was a recognition that the van coalition Ricketts led would have to win its victories in the streets, applying public pressure on legislators. Now, working from an overstuffed address book, a balky Blackberry and reserves of patience and deposits of good will, he works the phones on behalf of his drivers.

“It was total immersion. I think that’s what happened, though I did have one course in speech communication in college. I just knocked on doors. I knew we were right. We weren’t asking for welfare. We weren’t asking for loans. We weren’t asking for grants. We were creating an industry. We were creating a business—putting people in business, taking people to business.”

“If there is no Hector Ricketts, there would be no van business anymore,” Youshi Xu says.



Charter Van Service

Another valuable service that Ricketts provides residents of the city is offering charter services for community groups. Among these is the once-or-twice monthly transportation he provides to ferry the ladies of the Hadassah women's service organization based at the Kew Gardens Hills Jewish Center to the Empire City Casino at Yonkers Raceway. On a recent Wednesday, 22 members and friends, mostly white-haired, mostly female took their turns at the more than 5,300 video gambling games offering action at a penny a pop up to \$100 per game.

They go, they say, as often as they can—and they like to go with Mr. Ricketts as often as they can arrange it. The chapter leader, Elinor Schwartz, a retired teacher from Forest Hills, is quick to compliment Ricketts for his efforts on their behalf, which include making sure they're all on the bus to go home by 4 p.m. “This is the American Dream,” she says, sweeping her hand around the bus. “For us, too.”



From Flushing to Chinatown

Ricketts continually looks for ways to improve the range of services the vans offer to a diverse set of riders across the city. Recently, he helped set up the Flushing-Chinatown connection. “They found me,” he humbly says. That is a recurring theme for this man who has helped transform not only transportation services across New York City, but the lives of those who provide these services and benefit from them, as well.

In the very busy office of G&H Transportation on 41st Avenue, just west of Main Street, the windows look out on a row of white buses with red lettering in English and Mandarin. Youshi Xu and her husband Tony can’t seem to get a word in between calls on land lines and cell phones until they close the door and let others take messages.

They knew Ricketts as the man who sued the city council about van licenses. They knew a couple of people who had his help applying for the new licenses and asked him to set up their business, walking them through the license, permit, inspection and insurance procedures.

Youshi Xu says, “He would ask: How many vehicles? How many drivers? How many passengers? What is your run?” Her husband, suspicious about visitors to the office, consults in Chinese before adding to the conversation.

“In 1999, the business changed,” he said. “We lived in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. The Chinese there needed vans to get to work because they couldn’t afford cars and they do not use public transportation. Lots of Chinese people, the new immigrants, don’t like to take subways. They do not like to go underground, don’t speak English, don’t like dealing with other nationalities and cannot ask for help. On the van, the drivers and everyone speaks Chinese. It is more comfortable.

“At the time, they all used the dollar vans. A friend was a driver and he introduced me to the industry. It was very hard to apply for a community van license. Most drivers could not get licenses and operated illegally. But then Mr. Ricketts got them to operate legally and get all the licenses.

“If there is no Hector Ricketts, there would be no van business anymore,” Youshi Xu says.

And if there is no van business in Flushing? The impact would include higher prices at the local Chinese restaurant and other businesses that employ

predominantly Chinese workers. “It would be very hard for most of these people to get to work in Manhattan. They would have to look for work elsewhere—or restaurant and factory owners would have to operate their own transportation services to pick up their workers and pass the cost to the consumer, no?”

Ricketts has helped 12 Chinese-immigrant-run companies apply for licenses, Youshi Xu says. G&H runs more than 10 vans on the Flushing to Chinatown route—the Xu’s are wary about revealing the exact number of employees who work for them. More than 2,000 passengers a day use the company buses, they say. New routes in Brooklyn, from Bay Ridge to Chinatown and Sunset Park to the Metrotech development in downtown Brooklyn, are being planned.

When Tony Xu talks about the tickets and summonses and harassment he uses the same language as the Jamaican immigrants who work under Ricketts’ CTS umbrella. Youshi Xu makes the case: “We just want to be business people . . . Just follow the law and make it fair,” says Tony Xu. “I don’t need a friend, I need the law. If you follow the law, no problem.”

“All these tickets make no sense,” Youshi Xu adds. “We already have hack licenses and special 19A licenses and commuter van registration and insurance. We even have a manifest in each bus. All for \$2 a ride. But with the tickets, it becomes impossible for people to make a good business. For \$20 maybe, but not \$2 a ride.”

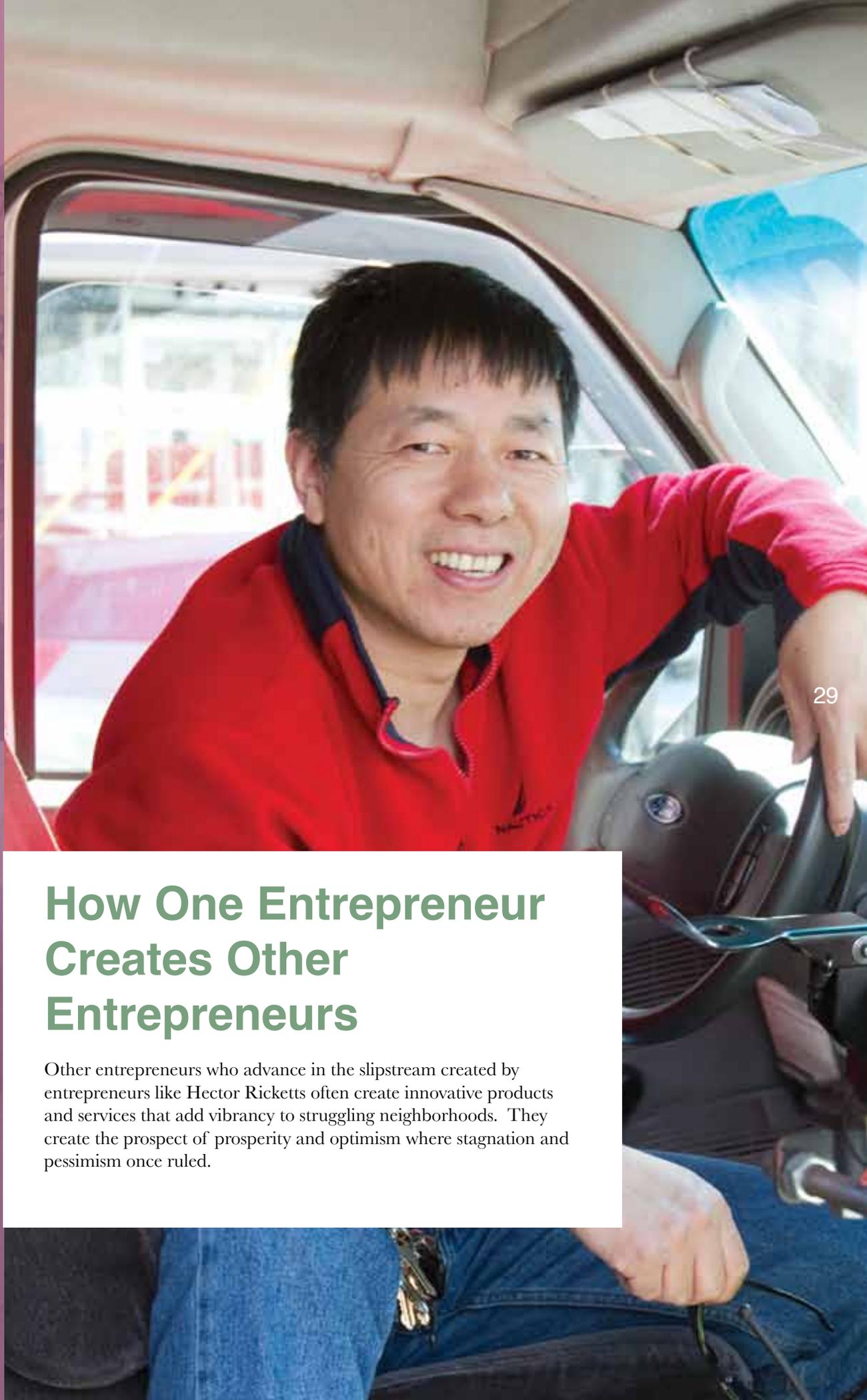
She adds, “Why don’t city buses and subways need manifests, why only commuter vans? Why can’t we do advertising on our vans and get some income when there is advertising on city buses and even on yellow cabs?”

For Ricketts, three miles to the southeast of Flushing’s Asian central business district, G&H is proof that the commuter van business is an engine of community development, providing opportunities for employment, opportunities to spend money supporting other local businesses and opportunities for passengers to get better jobs.

He calls Youshi Xu to follow up on their last meeting. Is there enough reverse commuting to sustain a Chinatown to Bay Ridge van, he asks. Who underwrites the cost of getting employees to work? Would it be worthwhile to offer a \$2 run to Chinatown and free trips to Bay Ridge? How do you think the TLC is going to react to that?

Ricketts asks that question often, since the Taxi and Limousine Commission sets the rules for his business. But that doesn’t keep him from finding ways to keep that business going and helping others at the same time.

儂人
PASSPOR
PHOTO



How One Entrepreneur Creates Other Entrepreneurs

Other entrepreneurs who advance in the slipstream created by entrepreneurs like Hector Ricketts often create innovative products and services that add vibrancy to struggling neighborhoods. They create the prospect of prosperity and optimism where stagnation and pessimism once ruled.



Highbrid Advertising

“We’re developing a plan for advertising on commuter vans with two young entrepreneurs who run Highbrid Advertising,” Ricketts says. “We’re doing this without the blessing of the TLC. Vans are on the street—and on the right streets, even when buses are in the garage. It’s a good way for certain businesses to get the message out.”

Five-year-old Highbrid Advertising is owned by Daniel Gutzmore and Juan Perez, former classmates at West Virginia University. Their office in a converted factory building is in Crown Heights. From a brick-walled office featuring a giant-size cutout of Derek Jeter and other evidence of an affection for the New York Yankees, Gutzmore and Perez have found a business niche—with the help of Hector Ricketts—which they describe as win-win-win.

Unless the same forces that threaten the commuter van business snap the regulatory lid shut.

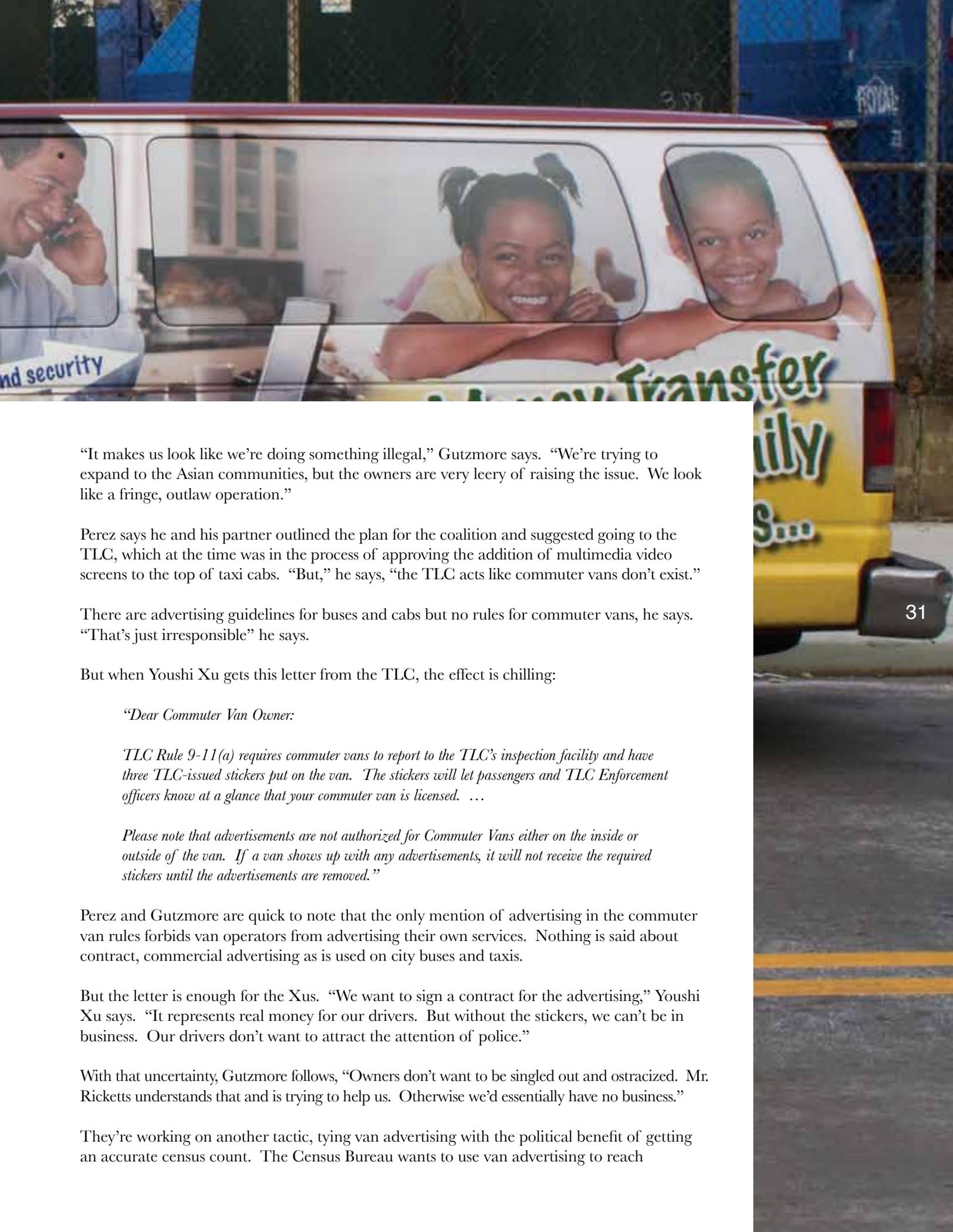
Highbrid proposes using commuter vans as mobile, outdoor advertising billboards to tool around the ethnic neighborhoods they serve while pitching businesses that want to reach those ethnic markets. The vans would be wrapped in a vinyl covering, similar to what is already used on some city buses and even subway cars. They have lined up clients—from Jamaica National Bank and Jamaica Air Lines to various healthcare companies and even a university. One of Ricketts’ CTS vans is already wrapped with a Jamaica Air Lines campaign.

What does it mean for each participating driver/owner? About \$1,000 a month per van, he estimates, passing nearly 70 percent of the revenue to the owners. After all, he argues, they own the medium. For Highbrid, it means finally establishing the firm as a player in the rich ethnic-advertising market in New York City and beyond.

The only problem, says Perez, is that the TLC has not approved the program.

“It is the grey area,” he says. “They’ve never even said it is illegal, because it is not. It’s just one of those things that never came up. But they have the authority to put provisions in and make a little money off it, too, by requiring a stamp or a permit.”

But in the absence of official approval, the van advertising campaign is stuck in neutral.



“It makes us look like we’re doing something illegal,” Gutzmore says. “We’re trying to expand to the Asian communities, but the owners are very leery of raising the issue. We look like a fringe, outlaw operation.”

Perez says he and his partner outlined the plan for the coalition and suggested going to the TLC, which at the time was in the process of approving the addition of multimedia video screens to the top of taxi cabs. “But,” he says, “the TLC acts like commuter vans don’t exist.”

There are advertising guidelines for buses and cabs but no rules for commuter vans, he says. “That’s just irresponsible” he says.

But when Youshi Xu gets this letter from the TLC, the effect is chilling:

“Dear Commuter Van Owner:

TLC Rule 9-11(a) requires commuter vans to report to the TLC’s inspection facility and have three TLC-issued stickers put on the van. The stickers will let passengers and TLC Enforcement officers know at a glance that your commuter van is licensed. ...

Please note that advertisements are not authorized for Commuter Vans either on the inside or outside of the van. If a van shows up with any advertisements, it will not receive the required stickers until the advertisements are removed.”

Perez and Gutzmore are quick to note that the only mention of advertising in the commuter van rules forbids van operators from advertising their own services. Nothing is said about contract, commercial advertising as is used on city buses and taxis.

But the letter is enough for the Xus. “We want to sign a contract for the advertising,” Youshi Xu says. “It represents real money for our drivers. But without the stickers, we can’t be in business. Our drivers don’t want to attract the attention of police.”

With that uncertainty, Gutzmore follows, “Owners don’t want to be singled out and ostracized. Mr. Ricketts understands that and is trying to help us. Otherwise we’d essentially have no business.”

They’re working on another tactic, tying van advertising with the political benefit of getting an accurate census count. The Census Bureau wants to use van advertising to reach

Caribbean, Asian, Hispanic and African-American neighborhoods, Gutzmore says. The ad agencies working with the bureau know Highbrid is prepared to put 25 to 50 vans covered in their message—with fliers inside the vans—in each neighborhood.

“There is no reason to present obstacles for the commuter van industry,” Perez says. “There’s no need to make it harder to do business, no reason to upset the community that uses the vans. If the law is wrong, you have to change the law.”

The Highbrid team knows a little about trying to establish a business in the face of entrenched interests. The MTA has a multi-billion-dollar contract to allow the builders of bus shelters to sell advertising space at each stop that was to bring New York City \$50 million a year for 20 years. If Highbrid’s ethnic-neighborhood campaign achieved only one percent of that contract, it would be sufficient for the advertising firm and its van-owner partners.

“How many MTA bailouts have there been? How many fare increases?” Gutzmore asks. “It only highlights how inefficient the MTA is.”

“The commuter van industry is private industry. It would behoove the city to let the commuter van industry flourish,” Perez says, shaking his head.

“To serve people who are willing to pay for the service,” Gutzmore adds.

Ricketts has been helping Highbrid establish itself in the community, they say. What became Highbrid had been an entertainment promotion company with other classmates from the city when they realized they needed to build capital.

“We had been riding dollar vans our whole lives,” Gutzmore says. “We worked with a guy who did vehicle wrapping for record companies and we came up with the idea to sell advertising on the vans. It was Nov. 4, 2004, the night George Bush was re-elected. We were at my mother’s home in Rosedale.”

“A neighbor said ‘see Mr. Ricketts,’” he says. “Our first client was a healthcare provider. Then the Universoul Circus, then Jamaica National Bank. It helped us make the transition from our nine-to-five jobs to this. Now we position ourselves as selling the market, the passengers riding the vans for an average of 52 minutes a day. Inside the vans, we can use direct-response literature. Outside we have rolling billboards, getting exposure 12 to 18 hours a day—on eye level—covering specific areas from commercial strips to residential neighborhoods. That’s a major competitive advantage for our clients.

“The whole TLC issue is like a hangnail,” Gutzmore says.

Perez and Gutzmore admire what they call Ricketts’ no-nonsense, by-the-books way of leadership.

“Everything is done with integrity,” Perez says. “I have to negotiate contracts with him and believe me, he knows what things are worth. He takes criticism from other owners sometimes, but he is the only one who has taken the torch of leadership. He has been a great partner and advocate for what we’re trying to do.”

Expect to see more CTS vans wrapped with advertising, even if it forces the TLC to talk with Ricketts and his group about the regulations. It is part of his wary but hopeful approach—when you’re in the right, you keep going.

“There’s no need to make it harder to do business, no reason to upset the community that uses the vans. If the law is wrong, you have to change the law.”

Janet Clar

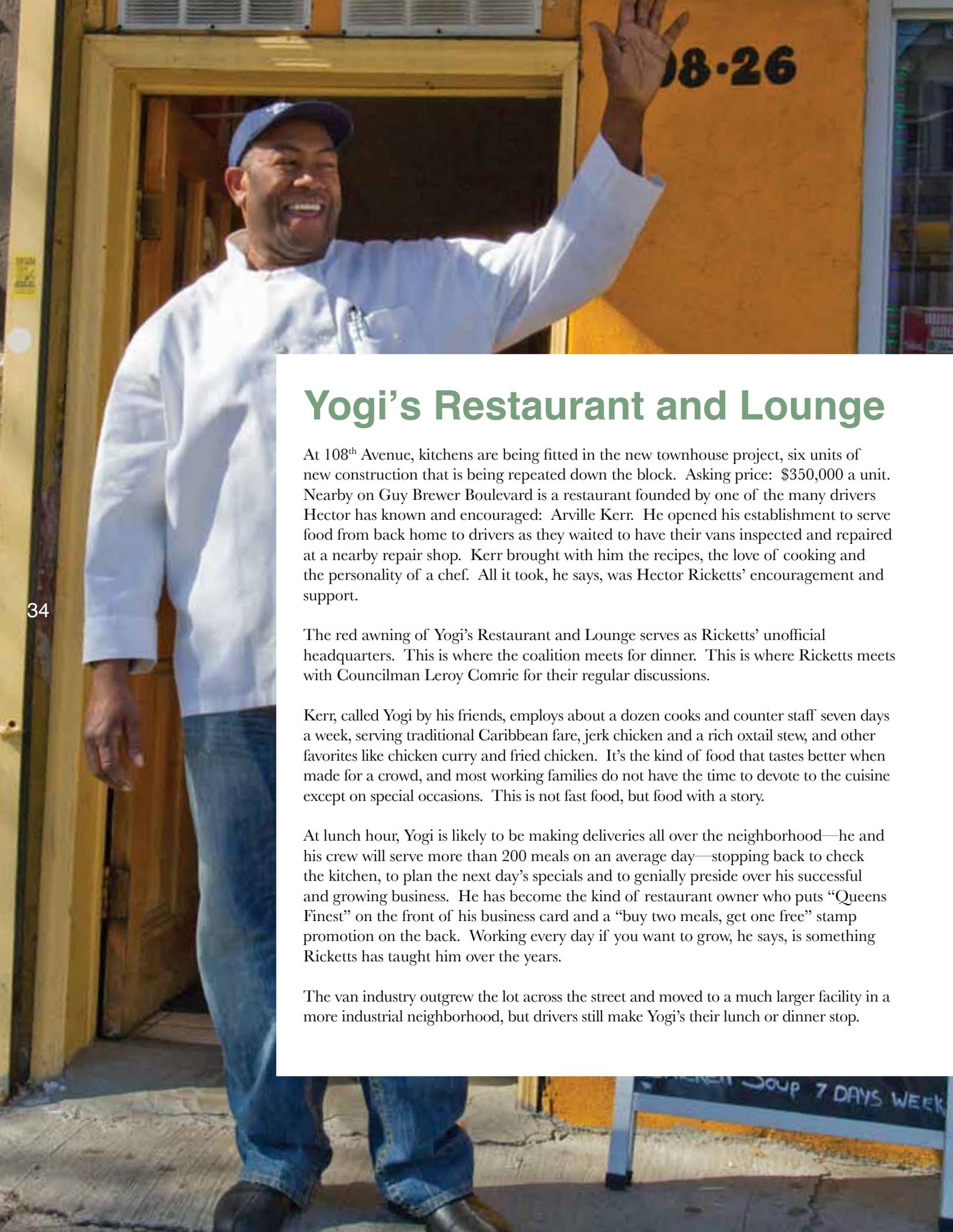
Janet Clar is another example linking Community Transportation Systems and the commuter van business to the pursuit of the American Dream. Once Ricketts’ secretary, Clar now freelances for a number of van companies, acting as a liaison between drivers and the TLC and DMV, reminding drivers when they have to appear in court and when licenses and inspections are due for renewal. She is a paperwork whiz, a model of low- and high-tech organization.

Ricketts, who is clearly proud of Clar’s achievements, says any major transportation company in the city should have scooped up her services long ago. But he’s happy to have her for a couple of hours a day to go through state DOT notices and make sure his drivers and their vans are straight with the regulators and on time with their tests and certifications.

“Much of this job is staying on top of documents and paperwork, which is hard to do when you’re outside, driving for 12 hours a day,” he says. “On his desk, he holds up dozens of files representing drivers ready for recertification. Files cabinets bulge with forms and paperwork.

“Every two years, the DMV goes through the files and fines you if your jacket isn’t complete,” Clar adds. “Your driving record is pulled every year, your medical record every two years. You’re only allowed a certain number of accidents, a number of violations, a number of accidents per 10,000 miles, a number of rules convictions per 10,000 miles. If not, your authority to operate is revoked.”

Thanks to the opportunities afforded to Clar through Ricketts, she has been able to carve out a living for herself while helping to keep the commuter van owner/operators going, in their communities, spending money and paying mortgages, buying gas and groceries and taking their children to schools and churches. One entrepreneur leads to another who leads to many more. It is how the economy grows through private enterprise.



Yogi's Restaurant and Lounge

At 108th Avenue, kitchens are being fitted in the new townhouse project, six units of new construction that is being repeated down the block. Asking price: \$350,000 a unit. Nearby on Guy Brewer Boulevard is a restaurant founded by one of the many drivers Hector has known and encouraged: Arville Kerr. He opened his establishment to serve food from back home to drivers as they waited to have their vans inspected and repaired at a nearby repair shop. Kerr brought with him the recipes, the love of cooking and the personality of a chef. All it took, he says, was Hector Ricketts' encouragement and support.

The red awning of Yogi's Restaurant and Lounge serves as Ricketts' unofficial headquarters. This is where the coalition meets for dinner. This is where Ricketts meets with Councilman Leroy Comrie for their regular discussions.

Kerr, called Yogi by his friends, employs about a dozen cooks and counter staff seven days a week, serving traditional Caribbean fare, jerk chicken and a rich oxtail stew, and other favorites like chicken curry and fried chicken. It's the kind of food that tastes better when made for a crowd, and most working families do not have the time to devote to the cuisine except on special occasions. This is not fast food, but food with a story.

At lunch hour, Yogi is likely to be making deliveries all over the neighborhood—he and his crew will serve more than 200 meals on an average day—stopping back to check the kitchen, to plan the next day's specials and to genially preside over his successful and growing business. He has become the kind of restaurant owner who puts "Queens Finest" on the front of his business card and a "buy two meals, get one free" stamp promotion on the back. Working every day if you want to grow, he says, is something Ricketts has taught him over the years.

The van industry outgrew the lot across the street and moved to a much larger facility in a more industrial neighborhood, but drivers still make Yogi's their lunch or dinner stop.

Willie's Auto Repair

Ricketts did not plan to visit the repair center today, but when the door on his bus malfunctioned, he transferred his passengers to another van and drove to the Baisley Boulevard garage called Willie's Auto Repair, set up against the Long Island Rail Road tracks heading to Brooklyn. Janet Clar is already there, making sure the paperwork is complete on vans that required repair after state inspections, ticking off each of the fixes that have to be reported back to the state.

Vehicles are inspected every six months and serviced with complete maintenance every 2,500 miles—that can be a couple of times a month. Drivers must file a daily log of mileage and conditions. Clar helps drivers keep their maintenance records at CTS, something the state can ask for every two years.

The owner of this establishment is an ace mechanic named Willie. It is the only place Hector Ricketts has taken his vehicle for years, and he likewise encouraged the drivers who worked with him to go there, too. Soon enough, Willie went from working for someone else to launching his own business, backed with Hector's confidence and support. The van industry relies on Willie and his mechanics to stay in business just as Willie has relied on Hector Ricketts and the van industry.

In the five service bays at Willie's, Ricketts estimates, 80 percent of the vans get their pre-inspections, preventive maintenance and breakdown repair. Four full-time and a handful of part-time mechanics pore over the vans. The garage has an apprentice program, helping to train eight young mechanics, too. This is yet another example of how one single entrepreneur can help create opportunities for dozens upon dozens of other individuals they may never even meet.

Willie and Hubert "Super" Henry run the show. The goal: to get a van back on the road safely and quickly. The key is to keep vans on the road.

"These vans do almost 100,000 miles of hard driving, starts and stops, a year," Henry says. "And almost everything on the van is subject to state inspection twice a year." Fail the inspection and your livelihood is taken out of service. The state pastes a big, red sticker on the windshield that limits you to 100 miles for the purpose of getting repairs and returning to prove the repair has been made.

What does the state inspection check? Henry knows the list from memory. "Front and rear ends, the exhaust system, mirror, doors, seats, the condition of the floor, every light bulb—they have to be brand new at all times—brakes, mufflers, emergency exits and equipment. The driver's seat must be able to be moved. Shocks, springs. There's a light exam to check for leaks in the engine and in the exhaust system."

The routine preventive maintenance sheet includes: battery connections, headlights, taillights, stop lights, interior lights, dash lights, electrical switches, reflectors, seat belts, power steering, steering wheel play, steering column, tire rod ends, the drag link, idler arm, pitman arm and power-steering fluid level, wheels and hubs, wheel alignment and balance, spare tire readiness, air conditioner operation, body damage, the condition of the brake and gas pedals and speedometer. If everything is okay, a road test completes the list.

Mechanics regard it as a personal failure when a van returns from the state inspection garage without a perfect score.

Ricketts says, "If it weren't for these guys, we wouldn't be in business. We couldn't afford it. We certainly couldn't afford to have these repairs made at the dealer. These guys are life savers."

STANDING
ANYTIME
←

Opportunity Costs: Services the Public May Never See

“I would own my own maintenance facility,” Ricketts says, if the van industry could overcome the restrictive regulations—if he didn’t need to worry that the city could drive his vans from the street with the stroke of a pen.

But when he and his coalition reach a permanent arrangement with the city and the MTA to exist as a collection of independent businesses, Ricketts says, he is confident the market would be there for expansion. “I would own more vans in conjunction with other operators,” he says, with this goal: “We would enable people to live where they want in the city without the need to own a car.”

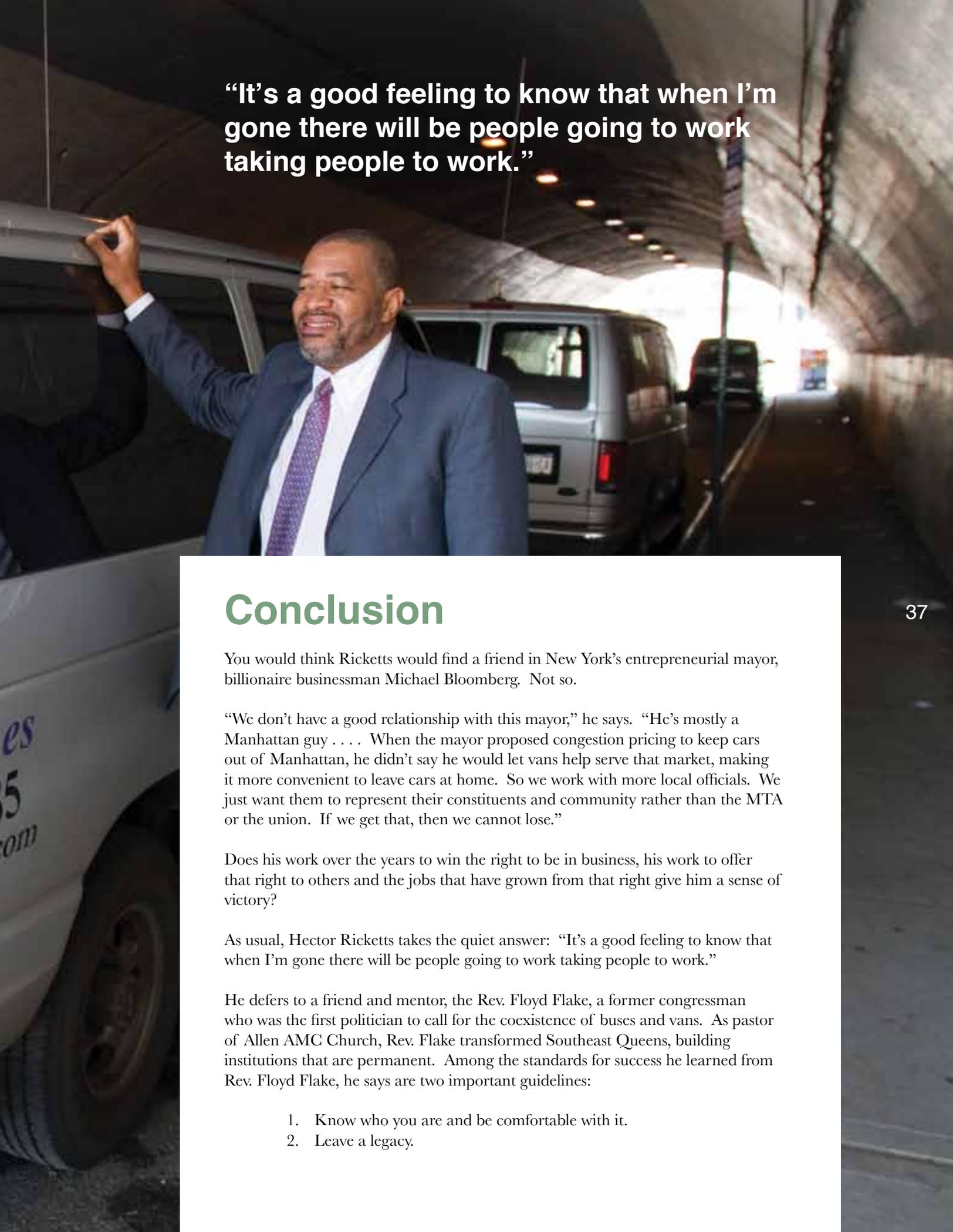
Ending the restrictions would put more vans on the street because more people would get into the business if it were more secure.

“More people would be working,” he says. “We could access many of the transportation centers and better serve people. Of the millions of dollars spent on transportation services not put out for bidding—government contracts, social-service contracts like the Access-a-Ride van services for wheelchair-bound and otherwise physically challenged passengers—if we could just serve our own community, the opportunity would be there to grow by 50 percent.”

And this is only the beginning of opportunities and services the public has never known and may never know—all of it bottled up because of the cork that is regulation designed to keep the vans down thereby protecting the public transit system from private competition.

www.citivanlines.com

Van Line
8-772-7888
citivanlines.com

A man in a dark suit and tie stands next to a white van in a tunnel. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. The tunnel has a curved ceiling with lights. Other vehicles are visible in the background.

“It’s a good feeling to know that when I’m gone there will be people going to work taking people to work.”

Conclusion

You would think Ricketts would find a friend in New York’s entrepreneurial mayor, billionaire businessman Michael Bloomberg. Not so.

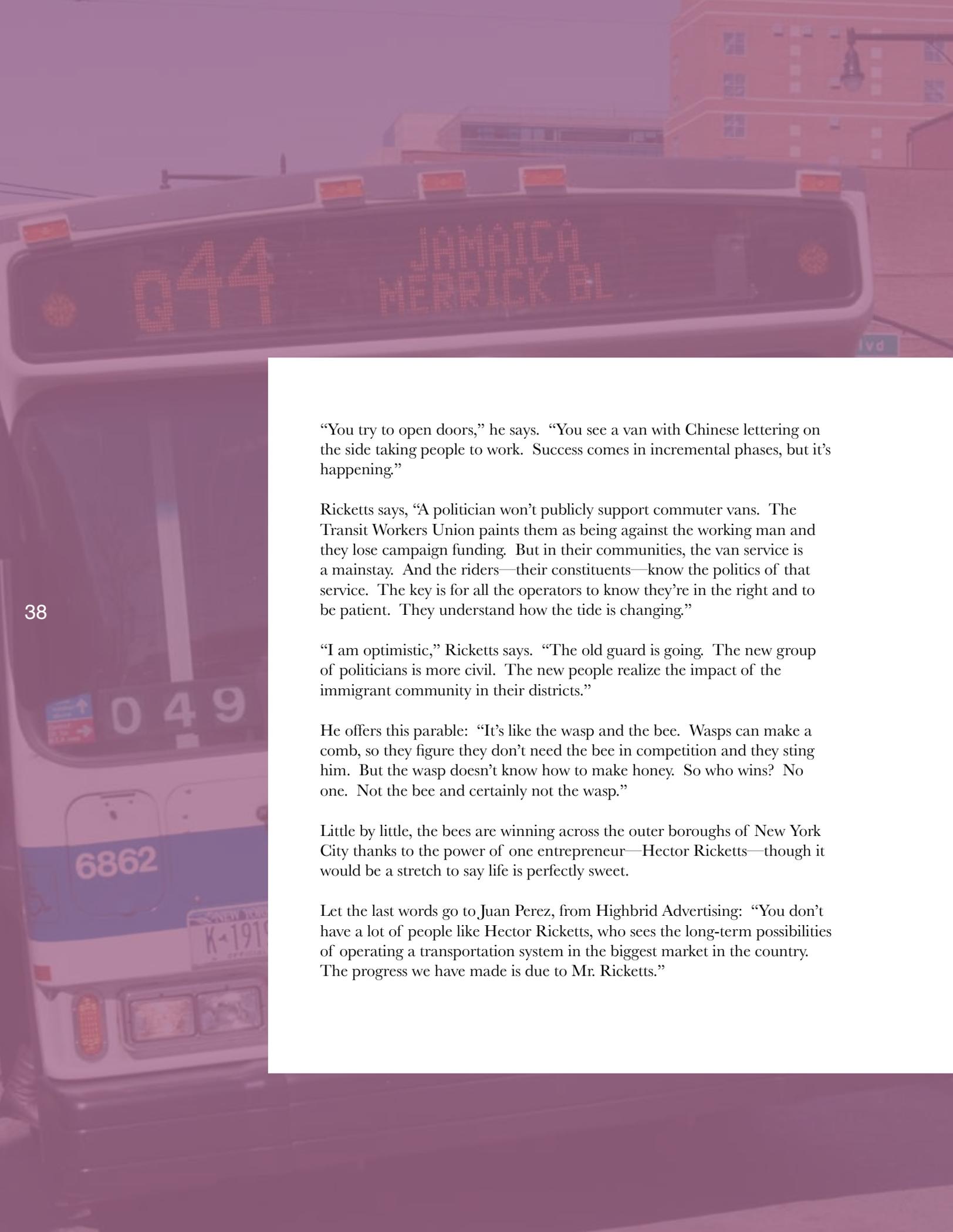
“We don’t have a good relationship with this mayor,” he says. “He’s mostly a Manhattan guy When the mayor proposed congestion pricing to keep cars out of Manhattan, he didn’t say he would let vans help serve that market, making it more convenient to leave cars at home. So we work with more local officials. We just want them to represent their constituents and community rather than the MTA or the union. If we get that, then we cannot lose.”

Does his work over the years to win the right to be in business, his work to offer that right to others and the jobs that have grown from that right give him a sense of victory?

As usual, Hector Ricketts takes the quiet answer: “It’s a good feeling to know that when I’m gone there will be people going to work taking people to work.”

He defers to a friend and mentor, the Rev. Floyd Flake, a former congressman who was the first politician to call for the coexistence of buses and vans. As pastor of Allen AMC Church, Rev. Flake transformed Southeast Queens, building institutions that are permanent. Among the standards for success he learned from Rev. Floyd Flake, he says are two important guidelines:

1. Know who you are and be comfortable with it.
2. Leave a legacy.



“You try to open doors,” he says. “You see a van with Chinese lettering on the side taking people to work. Success comes in incremental phases, but it’s happening.”

Ricketts says, “A politician won’t publicly support commuter vans. The Transit Workers Union paints them as being against the working man and they lose campaign funding. But in their communities, the van service is a mainstay. And the riders—their constituents—know the politics of that service. The key is for all the operators to know they’re in the right and to be patient. They understand how the tide is changing.”

“I am optimistic,” Ricketts says. “The old guard is going. The new group of politicians is more civil. The new people realize the impact of the immigrant community in their districts.”

He offers this parable: “It’s like the wasp and the bee. Wasps can make a comb, so they figure they don’t need the bee in competition and they sting him. But the wasp doesn’t know how to make honey. So who wins? No one. Not the bee and certainly not the wasp.”

Little by little, the bees are winning across the outer boroughs of New York City thanks to the power of one entrepreneur—Hector Ricketts—though it would be a stretch to say life is perfectly sweet.

Let the last words go to Juan Perez, from Hybrid Advertising: “You don’t have a lot of people like Hector Ricketts, who sees the long-term possibilities of operating a transportation system in the biggest market in the country. The progress we have made is due to Mr. Ricketts.”

About the Author



Robert Heisler has run newsrooms and entertainment departments at the *New York Daily News*, *New York Post*, *Newsday*, *Philadelphia Daily News* and the *Journal-News* in Westchester County, N.Y. His movie and theater reviews have had national exposure through the *Los Angeles Times-Washington Post* wire. Now a writer and media/marketing consultant, he has worked with ArtsWestchester and York College in Jamaica, N.Y. He has lectured on arts journalism and public relations at Hofstra, Syracuse and Fairfield universities.

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