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'Surge pricing' charged for about a third of Uber trips on New Year's Eve in Boston

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Uber driver Mark Bisson's vehicle.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 04, 2016

Above-normal rates were charged for about a third of Uber trips in Boston in the hours around the start of the new year, company officials said.

Nationally, about 40 percent of Uber trips involved such "surge pricing," the company said.

And the costs could be high: Sixteen percent of US trips cost riders at least three times the normal rate, officials at the ride-sharing company said.

Some Uber users took to social media over the weekend to complain about high fares they were quoted and charged late Thursday night and early Friday morning, including in Boston.

Rates for the popular service increase in real-time as demand rises. And the New Year's holiday, when people are out and about celebrating, is a particularly busy time.

The app warns users when surge pricing is in effect and prompts them to confirm that they are aware of the "surge multiplier" by typing in the number before they can request a ride. For example, if rates are 2.3 times higher than normal, users must type the number 2 and then 3 to confirm they are aware of the increased rate.

Another feature of the app allows users to calculate an estimate of their total fare before they request a ride.

Some riders suggested those features may have malfunctioned, saying on social media that they were charged more than the app said they would be.

In past years, similar grievances have been made about New Year's Uber bills.

The company this year, as it has in prior years, sent alerts



to users ahead of the holiday, reminding them to anticipate heavy demand and surge pricing during certain hours before and after midnight.

“Surge Pricing shouldn’t be a surprise,” the company said.

The company has been criticized in the past for its surge pricing practice.

Uber has maintained that surge pricing allows riders in a particular rush to get a ride even in high-demand scenarios, while less anxious users can wait out the surge pricing.

The company says surge pricing also encourages more Uber drivers to hit the road, which helps ease demand. But some researchers have questioned whether that actually works.

Officials at Uber also pointed out that the company offered a special “MegaPOOL” service exclusively in the Boston and Cambridge areas on New Year’s Eve for riders looking to save some money, possibly in exchange for slower service.

The service allowed groups of up to six people to submit their location and destination with the hope they were headed in the same direction as an 18-passenger trolley that offered rides for a flat fee of \$5, unaffected by surging.

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