Along for the ride: Politics, equine welfare, research and tourism pull city carriages in different directions

Wherever you live, you probably aren’t far from a commercial carriage or sleigh ride. Whether you’re skiing in Colorado, touring Manhattan, or viewing the pyramids in Egypt, a horse and carriage ride may be an option for your tourism dollars.

Are carriages rides quaint or cruel? That used to be the question, but in 2017, you might need to check your GPS before you answer. Events in 2016 showed us how complicated a carriage ride can get, as attorneys, veterinarians, protesters, lawmakers, police, researchers and even street maintenance experts and a United Nations agency brought new ammunition to the battle for and against your decision to go for a carriage ride...or not.

If you think you’re going to go on a romantic carriage ride with your significant other some night on your next vacation, you’d better be prepared to move over. It could be pretty crowded in the back of that carriage, thanks to all the special interests who want to be sure they know what’s going on.

In 2016, we saw our usual share of news about both accidents involving horse carriages on city streets and protests against their very existence. It’s been going on for years. But also in 2016, we saw the subject broaden out, particularly in the area of city politics.

The question is no longer whether city officials will bow to the wishes of protesters and ban the carriages; the question is how and if protester concerns and carriage owners rights to make a living can be balanced out so the rides continue, but are safer for the horses.

Let’s begin in a European city that seems to be the world capital of carriages: Vienna, Austria. You might think of this city as being identified with the dancing white stallions of the Spanish Riding School, but for those who have never had the privilege of watching a performance in the ancient riding hall, the symbolism of horses in Vienna is rooted in the “fiakers”, equally-ancient horse-drawn carriages who will trot you around the city center on a tour, or take you to a destination.

Consider this: you can pull up to Mozart's grave in a horse and carriage, since the fiakers offer a horse-drawn tour of the cemetery where he is buried. All you need to bring along is your own string quartet.

When the Spanish Riding School was granted protection as a cultural heritage treasure by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2015, you can imagine that the less royally-bred carriage and draft horses out on the street might have felt a little snubbed. Given the pressure to end the carriage trade from animal advocate organizations, the fiakers need all the ammunition they can muster to insure their future. So, they have applied to the UN for protection as a cultural icon.

Such a grant would be as an “intangible asset of culture”, and the fiakers and Lipizzaners wouldn’t be the only horses protected in this way. In Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan, UNESCO protects the ancient mounted game of kor-buru. French classical equitation as practiced at the Cadre Noir of Saumur, in France, is also protected, along with the National Horse Breeding Farm in Kladruby, Czech Republic.

Whether their request will be granted is a horse news stories for a future report, but one thing is certain: if the fiakers are protected by UNESCO, other cities’ carriage trades may also qualify, or at least be able to point to Vienna and UNESCO as evidence of legitimacy for the use of horses on city streets.
Critics of the fiakers’ application to UNESCO question whether the agency needs or wants to be associated with questionable horse welfare practices, but horses and donkeys work hard every day at many UNESCO sites worldwide.

In Vienna, the horses face opposition from an unlikely foe that is completely unrelated to animal advocacy. The city road maintenance department estimates that it would cost 700,000 euros (about US$728,000) to repair the streets that have become pitted from the carriage horses’ studded shoes. The city mandated a test of non-abrasive plastic shoes in 2007, but the drivers didn’t like them and went back to steel shoes with the offensive tungsten studs, which may help prevent the horses from slipping but which dig expensive trench-like furrows on the surface of streets.

**New York**

While Vienna’s horses are certainly making the news, and stimulating conversations worldwide about the role of carriage horses in a city’s culture, other cities are facing more politically-potent problems. The 2013 election promise made by New York Mayor Bill de Blasio to rid Central Park and mid-town Manhattan of its carriage rides is legendary. Almost four years later, the horses are still there and the brouhaha over their right to be there has, as with the fiakers, elevated the discussion of carriage rides to the realm of politics, rather than what animals should be doing in service to humans and in the face of danger.

The mayor earned 73 percent of the votes in the election, yet 61 percent of New Yorkers said in a poll that they wanted to see the horses stay in the city. He quickly found himself up against both public sentiment and some powerful interests who came to the defense of the horses and their drivers, such as the Teamsters Union, which was originally founded as the union of horse freight drivers.

The New York horses were back in the news last week when three leaders of NYCLASS, an anti-carriage political action committee that was a high profile donor to de Blasio in his election. Celebrations by the carriage trade may be short-lived, as the NYCLASS resignation press release includes a promise that the three are working on “new endeavors for animal rights”.

The success of NYCLASS--and its deep pockets--in helping get de Blasio elected has opened the door for other political advocacy groups in other cities with animal-friendly agendas. Animals have legitimate clout on election day now.

**Kansas City**

When a carriage horse bolted in Kansas City, Missouri last month, it made the news. The horse, its driver and two passengers were injured when the runaway horse's fearful flight was finally stopped in a collision. Within days, anti-carriage campaigners collected 15,000 signatures on a Change.org petition, insisting that carriage rides be stopped in the city. At the same time, a petition was launched to save the carriage horses. Kansas City has been the scene of 40 carriage horse accidents since 2014, according to a news story in the *Kansas City Star*.

**St. Charles**

Also last month, a frightened carriage horse in St. Charles, Missouri bolted himself and his carriage right into the nearby icy Missouri River, where he drowned, still attached to the carriage. Rescuers were unable to save him.

PETA was quick to respond to the unusual drowning death and is encouraging people to work to ban carriage rides in their cities and towns. According to PETA, carriage rides have been banned in these US cities: Biloxi, Mississippi; Camden, New Jersey; Key West, Palm Beach, Pompano Beach, and Treasure Island, Florida; and Salt Lake City, Utah.

“Watch out, New York City! You’re next” PETA promises on its website.

**Charleston**
If you visit the city of Charleston, South Carolina, you can’t miss the horse and mule carriages. They are almost a “must do” activity for tourists. But behind the scenes, Charleston is a city that has worked hard to make things fair to the horses, while also pacifying animal advocates’ concerns wherever possible.

While traffic safety may be the main concern in some cities, hot weather is the concern in Charleston. This month, the city will vote on new regulations that will withdraw the animals from city streets when the mercury climbs above 95 degrees, down three degrees from the old limit of 98. The city also measures the heat index, or “feels like” temperature, placing the limit for horses at 110 F, down from 125.

In Charleston, horses and meteorology are subjects that often overlap. Veterinarians and animal advocates also worked on the new regulations. Critics complain that the new regulations are based on information that was not researched using working carriage horses. They have suggested that new research studies be launched so working horses’ unique needs can be studied and met. The research was based on meteorological data for the city over a four-year period, in exactly the conditions experienced by the horses.

Charleston’s carriage horses and mules were the subject of a research paper published in Elsevier’s Journal of Equine Veterinary Science in 2014. “Retrospective Review of Carriage Horse & Mule Welfare in Charleston, South Carolina (2009-2012)” by the University of Vienna’s Dr. Julie Rosser is one of the few studies on commercial carriage horses in the United States.

The Charleston Animal Society (CAS) is also worried about maximum load limits for the large tour carriages, and about traffic congestion along the routes that the horses and mules travel.

Montreal

The caleche horses of Montreal are popular, and the city is reminiscent of Vienna in its old world charm that makes riding in a carriage seem like a quick immersion into a PBS Masterpiece filmset.

But Montreal is also a very modern city, and many people feel the horses are incongruous. To work on the problem, the mayor announced a one-year moratorium on carriages in the city last year. The drivers would lose their jobs. And what would become of the horses who could no longer earn their keep?

The moratorium lasted exactly two days, and the horses were back on the streets under a judge’s court order. But the news had already traveled around the world: a major North American city had banned horse carriages.

The reversal of the order was not so widely publicized.

This story took on another dimension in December. In one of the most dramatic pro-carriage news stories of the past decade, the city government in Montreal did an about-face and voted to appropriate $500,000--or the equivalent of $20,000 per horse in the city--to upgrade the service. The money won’t go directly to carriage owners but will be used to improve the infrastructure and make the industry more established. The city would also pay to microchip the horses, build shelters for the horses and potentially invest in a citywide uniform code for drivers.

"The first priority is to respect the horses and make sure they are in conditions that are decent," the mayor said.

The city may not intend the funding to be interpreted “pro-carriage”. It is more like "pro-solution". Like every other city where carriages on the streets, there are no easy answers and almost no possibility that either side is going to back down.

However you look at it, the situation is not where it was ten years ago, or even five years ago. It’s no longer protesters and carriage drivers shouting at each other. Each side is armed with consultants, researchers and attorneys…and maybe even a politician, meteorologist and pavement expert or two.
That's a heavy load for a horse to pull down any street in any city. You have to wonder where it is headed next.