

The Philadelphia Inquirer

ALWAYS ASKING. ALWAYS PHILLY.

SPORTS C1
HAYES:
A.J. BROWN,
LIKE WENTZ,
BETRAYED
PHILLY



PHILLY & REGION B1
WHY ONE TEACHER DECIDED
TO KEEP AN OPEN MIND
ABOUT STUDENTS' USE OF AI

BUSINESS & MONEY F6
GEN Z GOODWILL SHOPPERS
ARE INCREASINGLY FUELING
THE THRIFT STORE CHAIN

LIFE & CULTURE D1
THE HOTTEST
MUSICAL ACT
IN PHILLY?



A CENTER CITY ROBOT RIDE-ALONG

Uber Eats has been using autonomous delivery machines in Philly for months. Turns out we kind of like them.

By Ximena Conde and Jasen Lo
 Staff Writers

White 150-pound cuboids with heart eyes have been delivering meals through Rittenhouse and a chunk of Center City since March, drawing jeers, hugs, endless candid, and

numerous viral headlines.

Yet for all the attention Philadelphia's autonomous delivery pilot has received, including a New York Post headline: "Philadelphians already attacking Uber Eats delivery robots one month after launch," residents and lawmakers know very little about how the new technology works.

The Inquirer set out to better understand how Uber Eats' delivery bots operate, sending two reporters to tail an Uber Eats bot for the entirety of a "shift."

The 12-hour day revealed that the machines are easily overwhelmed

by crowds, struggle with curbs at night, and, yes, occasionally run red lights, as previously documented online by passersby.

But contrary to online discourse full of suggestions that Philadelphia is ground zero for the robot resistance, people were largely welcoming of the machines they encountered in Center City, protective even. Yet even as consumers marvel at the ease of use, and the savings from not having to tip, some remain torn about what the new technology could mean for human couriers.

→ SEE ROBOT ON A4



Uber Eats robot 1577 (left) is joined by a second one, parked and apparently waiting for an order, in the 1900 block of Chestnut Street one day last month, being trailed and surveilled by a pair of Inquirer reporters. Tom Gralish / Staff Photographer



Jana Muhammad kneels after being confirmed at St. Monica's Roman Catholic Church in South Philadelphia. "We're all looking to God to help us, to save us," she said. "For me, it was time." Joe Lambert / For The Inquirer

Catholicism is growing in Philly and New Jersey. Who's filling the pews?

Area churches are seeing an influx of conversions. "It was like something was missing," one man said, "maybe a sense of community."

By Jason Nark
 Staff Writer

Church bells rang out from one of Philadelphia's oldest cathedrals, echoing off downtown parking garages and office buildings, while one of the city's newer Catholics tried to explain his conversion.

Daniel Yesilonis, 32, grew up evangelical in the Harrisburg area and converted to Mormonism while studying at Temple University. He said his Mormon mission to Colorado Springs, Colo., was deflating,

though, and after he came out as gay during the COVID-19 pandemic, he officially left that church.

Like millions of Americans, Yesilonis figured he would try his best to be decent, to be spiritual without a label or building attached to it. But he soon felt a sense of loss.

"It was like something was missing, maybe a sense of community or something," Yesilonis said outside the church in April.

So, at an Easter vigil Mass in 2024, Yesilonis was among a group of candidates (people who were

already baptized) and catechumens (those who were never baptized) who became Catholic and joined St. John the Evangelist on 13th Street.

Converts like Yesilonis are on the rise at churches all over Philadelphia and New Jersey, diocese officials said, a conversion boom that is being reported globally, including large spikes in Canada and France. In Philly, there have been 1,162 candidates and catechumens this year, which is a 60% increase since 2025 and a 100% increase since 2017.

→ SEE CATHOLICS ON A13

In CAR-T therapy, new hope for kidney patients

Andrew Boyd wondered if he'd ever qualify for a transplant. Through a clinical trial of the technology, developed at Penn, he finally did.

By Kayla Yup
 Staff Writer

After his second kidney transplant failed, Andrew Boyd had exhausted his options.

The Philadelphia resident's highly sensitive immune system almost certainly would reject another donor organ, doctors warned. For seven years, he required dialysis three times a week to replicate the kidney's blood cleansing functions.

Then doctors offered him an experimental treatment using CAR-T technology invented at the University of Pennsylvania. Developed to fight cancer, the therapy works by supercharging the body's own immune system.

CAR-T has revolutionized the treatment of blood cancers, with success rates so high that some have called it a rare "cure."

But since its first use in a 2010 clinical trial involving leukemia patients at Penn, efforts to broaden CAR-T's applications have advanced slowly. The therapy has not proven effective against solid cancers, although some studies have shown potential.

The idea of using it for transplants did not initially occur to Carl June, a Penn scientist who pioneered its development and

→ SEE CAR-T ON A5

Why Parker's rideshare tax plan went nowhere

As opposition grew, the mayor stood by her \$1-per-ride proposal. It never even came to a vote in Council.

By Anna Orso
 and Sean Collins Walsh
 Staff Writers

Philadelphia Mayor Chelle Parker often cites a formative moment from her past when talking about her approach to political

dealmaking: As a young legislator in Harrisburg, she helped authorize a cigarette tax to fund Philadelphia schools by persuading Republicans to vote for it.

Today, the centrist Democratic mayor who leads the state's bluest city proudly maintains relationships with members of the Pennsylvania GOP. But as of late, Republicans are not the ones holding back her agenda.

Her biggest obstacle is, apparently, much closer to home.

On Thursday, Philadelphia City Council, with its Democratic supermajority, rejected a series of tax

increases that the mayor proposed as part of her budget for the coming fiscal year. The most high-profile and controversial was a \$1-per-ride tax on rideshare services like Uber and Lyft, intended to generate \$48 million annually for the Philadelphia School District, which is facing a \$300 million structural deficit and hundreds of planned staff cuts.

For weeks, Council members appeared skeptical of the surcharge and worried that it would fall on their constituents. They were angry that they were being asked to raise taxes for public education while the district's leaders

simultaneously advanced a plan to close 17 schools.

Meanwhile, their Democratic colleagues in Harrisburg — including Gov. Josh Shapiro — showed little appetite to raise taxes themselves.

But Parker did not change course. She insisted that her \$1-per-ride plan was the best way to fund the schools. And she stuck with parallel proposals to raise the city's hotel tax to generate money for homelessness prevention and to levy a 25-cent fee on retail deliveries to fund pothole repairs.

None of it will become reality. In

→ SEE PARKER ON A15

WEATHER B8
CLOUDS AND SUN
HIGH 90 / LOW 66

ALL OF PHILLY,
IN YOUR INBOX.
SIGN UP FOR FREE:
INQUIRER.COM/
NEWSLETTERS

© 2026 The Philadelphia Inquirer, LLC. Home delivery: 215-665-1234 or 1-800-222-2765. Single-copy price may be higher in outlying areas.

