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Complaints About Taxi Cab Commission Abound During Hearing, But Lawmakers Appear Helpless to Address Issues

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Mervin Smith, president, East End Taxi Association, testifying on Friday, Sept. 29, 2023. By. PHOTO CREDIT: BARRY LEERDAM, LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS.

Amid a chorus of grievances and concerns voiced by taxi owners and operators, lawmakers appeared uncertain about how to address the longstanding issues plaguing the Taxicab Commission.

At the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall on St. Thomas on Friday night, industry stakeholders assembled in force, expressing their mounting frustrations with the Commission. Yet, notably absent from the proceedings were any members of the taxicab commissioners, a fact pointed out

by the chair of the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection, Sen. Carla Joseph.

Mervin Smith, president of the East End Taxi Association, started off the discussion by castigating the commissioners for persistent service issues faced by drivers. He noted the continued inaction by the same individuals who have overseen the organization for years. Shifting gears, Smith delved into a primary concern: "Right now our industry is being overrun by...the so-called limousines," an outcome of a 2012 legislative amendment that removed limousines from the purview of the Taxicab Commission. Smith, along with others, pointed out the disadvantage taxi drivers face due to the restriction of possessing only two medallions, while private car operators merely require a business license.

Critics also honed in on the Commission's inefficient operations. Stephen Lewis of Champion Taxi & Tours expressed concerns about the recent legislation that ostensibly bolstered the power of the executive director but left her answerable to a board. He questioned the legitimacy of a chairperson who, according to claims, does not even reside in the territory.

In a similar vein, Carey Harrigan of Best Taxi shed light on the difficulties faced due to a protracted transfer process of a medallion, causing him a three-week income deficit. Echoing Harrigan's sentiment, Eldon Dane Francis of 4 Virgin LLC emphasized the enduring service delivery challenges from the Taxicab Commission. Backing Francis's statement, a resident of St. John recounted his nearly two-year-long ordeal awaiting a replacement medallion, even after personally handing over necessary documents to the taxicab officials.

Despite some showing empathy for executive Director Vernice Gumbs, who has been grappling with health issues, several attendees lambasted her for her inconsistent rule-making. Nilsa Serrano of "Live Laugh Love" and others alleged that many of the commission's rules are not even documented, leaving taxi drivers and operators in the dark.

Highlighting the Commission's repeated absences, Yolande Joseph brought up their failure to appear before the Budget, Appropriations & Finance Committee. Addressing the evasion of accountability, Sen. Joseph recognized the need to reach out to the executive branch for intervention.

While absorbing the litany of complaints, Sen. Milton Potter recognized the urgency of the situation: "Clearly, we have to do something." However, like his other colleagues, Potter was unable to specify what action is needed to resolve this longstanding thorn in the side of the territory's tourism industry.