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Taxi Turf War: St. Croix Drivers Clash with Unlicensed Rivals Amid Industry Crisis

Illegal operators steal passengers, including tourists, sparking outrage among licensed taxi veterans

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Taxis in Christiansted, St. Croix. By. VIPA

Stakeholders in the taxi industry convened on Friday evening for the final iteration of a series of townhall meetings intended to discuss the state of the Taxicab Commission, the industry's governing body.

Like the previous meetings on St. Thomas and St. John, the taxi community on St. Croix expressed trepidation at the thought that ride-sharing companies could gain a toehold in the territory's transportation sector, emboldened by the lack of effective regulation and enforcement

in the industry.

Samuel Ferdinand, who told meeting attendees that he'd been in the taxi business for more than three decades, said that there have been a lot of "disturbances in the taxi industry" over the past few years, especially "with these guys calling themselves Uber."

Mr. Ferdinand said that now, hotels are encouraging front desk staff to call non-licensed drivers to pick up fares. "They are bold enough to be coming in front of us and picking up people, and then cuss us when we talk to them about illegal taxi driving," he said, noting that many who do this point to the lack of any enforcement officers who could stop the practice.

"People are renting buses and coming down by the ship picking up people in front of us, and when we talk to them they say 'well we could do it because there's nobody there to stop us,'" Mr. Ferdinand recounted. "It's disgusting for us," he continued, noting that there have been no taxi tests administered in perhaps the past five years, which only serves to compound the issue.

"There's so many people out there who would like to drive taxi but don't have the opportunity to drive taxi," Mr. Ferdinand declared. He says that some of the requirements to hold a taxi license was also hindering the growth of the pool of operators. While praising the efforts of Taxicab Commission Executive Director Vernice Gumbs, he noted that she did not have any institutional support. "We love Ms. Gumbs because she tries her best to help us but she's on her own."

Indeed, Ms. Gumbs, who attended the meeting virtually, noted that she had to use her cell phone to connect to the session because the computers in the TCC office were not fitted with cameras or microphones, a circumstance that reinforced the sentiment that the Commission is underfunded and unprepared to operate in a modern environment.

Mr. Ferdinand also pointed out the disparity in regulations governing the limousine industry compared to how the taxi sector operates. As in previous meetings, he highlighted the fact that one limousine license allows the holder to operate multiple vehicles under that single license, something that is not possible under the regulatory regime for taxi operators.

Senator Gittens, after listening to Mr. Ferdinand's woes, agreed that the main problem was the lack of enforcement. "The laws are on the books that should be adhered to, and if they're violated, then some law enforcement entity or government entity should be addressing it," he stated. Notwithstanding the manpower challenges currently being faced by the commission, Mr. Gittens said that all law enforcement officers should be "fully versed" in the section of the VI Code that deals with vehicles for hire.

Edwin Stephen, another taxi operator, said the numbers of licensed drivers are dwindling. "Coronavirus wiped out a lot of our drivers," he noted. "Also, a lot of our drivers did retire...and with the government not issuing the taxi examination also put a damper on our taxis around here." Each of these factors compounds the taxi shortage on St. Croix, Mr. Stephen said.

He supported Mr. Ferdinand's complaints about the proliferation of unlicensed operators in the sector, many of whom he said "get very aggressive with the licensed taxi drivers," even to the point of physical altercations on the taxi stand.

Mr. Stephen exhorted the public to remember that the taxi industry "is one of the last remaining businesses that local people have, along with fishermen, a little bit of trucks, and one ice cream store."

The lack of licensing exams, he said, felt like “sabotage” from the government in the face of the rising proliferation of unlicensed drivers. There is a batch of 50 new drivers who wish to become taxi operators, he said, however “nobody can tell us when they’re going to have the tests or when the examination is going to be given.”

The barriers to licensing are preventing new, younger operators from entering the business, industry representatives said. Paul Roberts, who has been a taxi operator since 1996, admonished that “we need to open the windows so the younger generation can come in because the older guys are dying out and retiring.” Both he and Mr. Stephen before him argued that an influx of younger drivers would revitalize the industry by bringing new ideas and new energy into the taxi sector. “Uber will never solve the problem, we need to help the young people to get into the system and learn the system.”

The Ms. Gumbs, TCC executive director, was sympathetic to the woes expressed by the three taxi industry representatives, and said that she has been trying to meet with VIPD Commissioner Ray Martinez in order to discuss receiving assistance with enforcement. “I reached out again in February and to date I am still waiting,” she noted.

However, Mr. Gittens said that seeking external assistance would likely not lead to success. “The police department [is] strapped for manpower too, DPNR [is] strapped for manpower, everybody is strapped for manpower. So the Taxicab Commission has to hire enforcement officers,” he recommended. “That’s how they make their money, do their administrative tickets, etc.” The lack of enforcement officers leads to a lack of revenue, which in turns means that the Commission must seek appropriations from the Legislature for everything they need. “So we have a problem,” Mr. Gittens remarked.

In regards to the long-delayed resumption of the taxi classes and examinations, Ms. Gumbs informed that one factor is the lack of promulgated rules and regulations in place. There is a need to ensure that “those persons attending these classes are knowledgeable of the rules and regs that governs the industry,” she said, noting that there have been meetings between the TCC board and representatives of the University of the Virgin Islands “in an effort to finalize the details of resuming those taxi classes.” However, during her line of questioning, Senator Carla Joseph learned that the process of revising the TCC’s policies, procedures, rules and regulations had come to a halt because the attorney working on the project had not been paid. “The bills were submitted through the ERP system before the fiscal year ended,” said Ms. Gumbs. “I guess as a result of the government’s slow cash flow, our invoices were not paid.”

The issue of the disparity between limo and taxi operators was a thorny one, Ms. Gumbs noted. Regarding limousines, “the law states currently that they are not automobiles for hire,” she said. “But if they’re not automobiles for hire then what are they? Why are they out there intruding and crouching on the space of taxi operators?” she went on to ask, stating that the TCC had been asking the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs for the regulation of limos to be returned to the Commission’s jurisdiction.

“We’re told that Assistance Commissioner [Horace] Graham is working on it. To date, and to the best of my knowledge, no rules and regs have been presented,” Ms. Gumbs said. “So it’s not that the Taxicab Commission is just sitting idly by,” she declared, noting that draft legislation to return limousine service regulation to the remit of the TCC has still not seen the light of day over a year since she was told by the bill’s sponsor that it was in progress.

Sen. Joseph reassured meeting attendees that the legislation was still being worked on, with amendments being discussed and included. Sen. Gittens vowed to “start making some noise to ask the senators...to get up off what they’re sitting on and let’s get this legislation moving.” The lack of it, he argued, “is crippling the industry.”

Meanwhile, Mr. Gittens noted the sparse attendance. “The last time they had such a townhall meeting in the St. Thomas/St. John district, the place was overflowing with taxi drivers and their concerns.” Praising the three taxi operators who came to provide testimony, the lawmaker said that the rest of the St. Croix taxi driver cohort needs to “step up” as well.

Nevertheless, Mr. Gittens expressed grave concern with the status quo on St. Croix, saying that the practice of hotel workers summoning unlicensed drivers for pickups was a “dangerous situation.”

“Only God knows who these front desk clerks are calling,” he remarked. “If the wrong person picks up somebody from a hotel, we got trouble.” The lawmaker suggested that Ms. Gumbs pursue outreach to the Department of Tourism, as well as hotel and restaurant associations, to educate them on the need to ensure that only licensed taxis should be utilized for guest transportation. “Don’t let me have to say I told you all so,” Mr. Gittens admonished.

The meeting ended with a promise from Ms. Joseph that lawmakers present on Friday evening would press their colleagues for movement on the legislation currently in progress that would rationalize the disparities between taxi and limousine licensing. For her part, Ms. Gumbs announced her readiness to work with legislators “to discuss and remedy the myriad of issues that the taxicab [industry] is currently facing.”

Taxi operators, however, have called on the TCC executive director to be more proactive in her efforts to implement change. “Ms. Gumbs, you need to wake up and let’s get going,” said Mr Roberts.