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No Taxi Exams in Five Years - Dysfunctional Board, Lack of Funds Blamed

Lack of certification tests leaves new drivers idle and calls for urgent action

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Janeke Simon **March 11, 2024**

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During Friday's [townhall meeting on St. Croix](#) for stakeholders in the taxi industry, the lack of testing to certify new drivers was highlighted as a major issue preventing new operators from joining the ranks of taxi operators on the Big Island.

In his remarks to lawmakers on the Senate Committee on Government Operations, Veteran Affairs and Consumer Protection, taxi operator Edwin Stephen noted that no exams had been administered in over five years.

“With the government not issuing the test for examination, we kind of feel they’re sort of sabotaging, especially when it comes to the cruise lines,” he stated emphatically. An influx of eager new drivers remains at arms length, unable to become certified as taxi operators because “nobody can tell us when they’re going to have the tests or when the examination is going to be given,” Mr. Stephen complained.

Samuel Ferdinand, another taxi operator, said that interest in joining the sector was high, but concurred with Mr. Stephen that the lack of testing was a major barrier. “There’s so many people out there who would like to drive taxi but don’t have the opportunity,” he noted.

Even recent training administered by the V.I. Port Authority had not resulted in anything tangible for current taxi operators. “We never got the stamp to say we did it,” said Mr. Ferdinand. “As a matter of fact Willard John [VIPA board chair] said he was supposed to keep a get-together to give everybody their stamp – it never happened.”

Taxicab Commission Executive Director Vernice Gumbs acknowledged the suspension of testing as a problem, and said that her team was working along with the University of the Virgin Islands to resume the program, hopefully in May of this year.

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.”

upon further probing by Sen. Joseph, Ms. Gumbs admitted that the lack of new rules and regulations did not necessarily prevent the TCC from holding new classes. “While we are working on revising the rules and regs we may be able to start the classes using the rules and regs of 2014,” Ms. Gumbs noted. “That did go through legal sufficiency but was never promulgated.”

With that ability in place, Sen. Joseph wondered why the TCC did not just go ahead and begin classes with the old rules framework in place. She queried the May timeline, asking Ms. Gumbs “why so late?”

The TCC has hesitated to put on new classes based on the old regulatory framework, Ms. Gumbs said, because it does not address new developments “for example, electronic payments, it does not address current issues that affect today’s industry.”

Sen. Joseph was not convinced that further delays would be helpful, but Ms. Gumbs noted that the issue has been complicated by a poorly-functioning board. “The board is responsible for the policies and procedures and the rules and regs,” the TCC executive director insisted. “If they can get a quorum to come together to ensure that...we’re going to vote and move forward with this, then until that time, nothing can be done.”

Even so, the lawmaker refused to let Ms. Gumbs off the hook in regards to responsibility for resuming the long-awaited classes. “You already have an executed document...between Tourism and UVI to offer the classes and do the testing,” Sen. Joseph insisted. “You shouldn’t have to wait...you can, based on what counsel represented, work with that and then work on getting your board to meet....That’s what executive directors do as well,” she chided. “Why haven’t you acted? You need to act on it; don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.”

Senator Kenneth Gittens used the opportunity presented to comment on the dysfunctional nature of the Taxicab Commission board, the majority of whose members are serving long-expired terms. “The bottom line is that the Taxicab Commission needs total restructuring, and especially as it pertains to the board,” he declared, promising to push his fellow lawmakers to advance the legislation they have been working on in that regard.

Ms. Gumbs also used irregularities discovered during previous iterations of the classes, which reportedly prompted audits from the Inspector General’s office as well as the office of the Attorney General, as reasons why classes could not be resumed at this time. “All these things have to be addressed,” she said, an argument which Sen. Joseph rejected outright.

“I don’t see how an ongoing investigation has to do with you offering a class,” the lawmaker rebutted. “I don’t see how it interferes,” she continued, noting that the people who sparked the allegations “may not be there any longer.”

Sen. Joseph also used the ongoing problems with the composition of the TCC board to exhort industry stakeholders to present themselves for selection. Directly addressing the representatives of the taxi industry that spoke at Friday’s meeting, the legislator said “my charge to you gentlemen this evening is to get your members...please send up their names, you can send it to any of the senators, you can send it straight to the Office of the Governor, or even Miss Gumbs....You need to definitely put together your resume and send that up so you could get this vital board populated with current members who have the heart of the taxicab industry at the forefront.”

Last year, two lawmakers [wrote to Governor Albert Bryan Jr.](#) pleading with him to appoint new members to the TCC board in order to solve the issue of expired tenures.