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No Official Budget Data, Paychecks to Someone No Longer Employed: Taxicab Commission Slammed For Mismanagement

Senators advocate for legislative change to include ride-hailing services following commission's budgetary missteps

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Taxicab Commission Executive Director Vernice Gumbs By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

The executive director of the VI Taxicab Commission, Vernice Gumbs had another difficult day before the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance, as lawmakers expressed extreme disappointment at the lack of progress on the commission's chronic issues.

As committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory explained, the commission did not present a valid budget request during the fiscal year 2024 appropriations cycle last year, [despite several scheduled appearances](#) before the committee. As such, funding was only appropriated to cover personnel costs. On Monday, “we need to hear from the Taxicab Commission to determine the appropriate amounts to appropriate for the FY ‘24 budget,” Senator Frett-Gregory said. “Hopefully we’ll hear from them today on their current revenues that they’re collecting and their previous revenues that they’ve collected in 2023 to support their requests for the budget.”

During her testimony, Ms. Gumbs advanced a request for \$1,506,900.35, of which approximately 60 percent would go to salaries and fringe benefits. A sum of just under \$480,000 would be used on a digitization project that would “fully automate internal processes,” she said, while also giving “employees and stakeholders...the ability to conduct business remotely, efficiently and effectively” online.

However, Ms. Gumbs soon proved to be unable to supply key information requested by lawmakers that would help them determine whether to allocate the requested amount of funding. There was no official record of any revenue collected for the St. Thomas/St. John district, for example, a circumstance explained thusly by the executive director. “When I asked the collection clerk to assist me, she refused...she not only refused, but she left and went home for the day, feeling sick.”

Ms. Gumbs offered an “unofficial summary from the Department of Treasury” that put St. Thomas/St. John revenues at \$211,838.37 as of June 2023, but Frett Gregory was not satisfied, criticizing Ms. Gumbs’s apparent lack of internal financial controls.

“You’re asking us for one point something million dollars and you don’t have the collections data. That’s something you should be managing; that employee should be giving you those receipts at the end of every day....By your own admission, you can’t tell us what those taxi drivers paid for the fiscal year of 2024 to date, but you are here before us, asking us for a \$1.2 million budget,” Frett-Gregory chided.

With no reported figures for 2024 to date, and an unofficial revenue estimate that omits the last quarter of fiscal year 2023, lawmakers described the situation before them as “challenging,” “difficult,” and “deeply troubling.” Compounding the issue, a question from non-committee member Senator Carla Joseph revealed that the TCC board had not even approved the budget request being presented to lawmakers on Tuesday.

Circling back to the lack of verified collections figures, Frett-Gregory highlighted Ms. Gumbs’s perceived failure as titular head of the semi-autonomous agency to maintain robust internal controls over the TCC’s finances. “What is your challenge with providing that information? There is no process, there is no procedure internally that can prevent you as the director from having that information. There’s like zero excuse on this,” the senator scolded. “This is the people’s hard-earned money. And you come here today again and you cannot say to us what did you receive, what did you collect....What is your role? What is your understanding of your role in this unit?”

The budget committee chair was not the only lawmaker to indirectly question Ms. Gumbs’s suitability for the job at hand. Senator Javan James Jr., after asking for more detail about the TCC’s connectivity issues, seemed dumbfounded that an unstable, unreliable internet connection has not been resolved in over 24 months. “If you tell me you can’t do that within two years, with all due respect, you don’t need to be here.” Meanwhile, Senator Frett-Gregory rubbished Ms. Gumbs’s claim that lack of funding was the barrier to solving the internet issue, as she confirmed

that the TCC was fully funded in previous fiscal years. “You can’t use funding as an excuse, that’s not the reason,” the lawmaker admonished Ms. Gumbs.

The lack of urgency regarding administrative affairs of the TCC was highlighted again when lawmakers learned that a former employee had been collecting paychecks even after they had left the commission in 2021. “I think they received approximately, maybe nine checks after they were separated from the agency,” Ms. Gumbs disclosed, saying that she had written to the individual asking them to repay the funds, but had not received a response. Late last year, Ms. Gumbs said, she turned to the Department of Justice for assistance.

Towards the end of the discussion, Senator Kenneth Gittens reminded his colleagues that the displayed dysfunction of the Taxicab Commission was the reason that he has voted against funding for the agency “in the last several years.” In fact, he took the opportunity to reiterate his call for the commission to be defunded altogether, unless serious reform is implemented. “I can’t emphasize again my total disappointment in the Taxicab Commission,” Gittens said, calling for the legislative branch to “address this once and for all”. He once again rallied support for his proposed measure that would bring all vehicles for hire under one regulatory umbrella. “We could even include the Uber, and we could even include the gypsy taxi,” the senator mused, exhorting his colleagues to “work together in getting this bill out so that we can change the dynamics of the Taxicab Commission.” Until that is done, Gittens vowed, “I will not be supporting any, not a penny to the Taxicab Commission until we address this once and for all.”

Ms. Gumbs noted, in response to more than one inquiry from lawmakers, that an audit of the agency was currently underway. Lawmakers did not vote on the commission’s budgetary request, despite the executive director’s promise to deliver “unofficial” financial information to committee members “by the end of next week.”