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“It’s a Terrible Idea”’: Bill to Place Limousine Operators Under Taxi Cab Commission Held in Committee After Fierce Opposition

Proposed legislation to expand the Taxi Cab Commission's oversight to limousine operators faces harsh criticism from industry leaders and concerns from lawmakers about the commission's capacity to manage additional responsibilities

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Chris Limousine Service in St. Thomas.

The ability of the Virgin Islands Taxi Cab Commission to manage additional responsibilities proposed in new legislation repeatedly came into question during a meeting of the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection on Tuesday.?

Tensions flared and opinions differed as stakeholders debated Bill 35-0251, a measure seeking to change the name of the Virgin Islands Taxi Cab Commission to the Virgin Islands Taxicab and Limousine Commission and giving oversight authority to the Commission over limousine services operators. Ultimately, lawmakers decided that the measure was not ready for a vote.?

Senator Marvin Blyden sponsored the bill, and bemoaned the sheer number of complaints about the limousine industry that he says is, “for all intents and purposes, unregulated.” Among the senator’s criticisms was the apparent “lack of proper standards” resulting in limousine operators operating without standard amenities and subsequently “eroding the quality of the territory’s tourism product.” He was also perturbed by the absence of established standards for the limousine drivers. “So-called limousine drivers are picking up passengers in T-shirts and shorts,” lamented Mr. Blyden. Among its many provisions, Bill 35-0251 would institute a dress code for limo operators.

In his impassioned introduction of the bill, Mr. Blyden contended that limousine operators have been allowed to act outside of the constraints of a strong enforcement mechanism. “We simply cannot allow a lawless situation to continue,” he told his colleagues. Describing the taxi industry as “the only part of the tourism industry in which locals have a significant ownership stake,” he appealed to legislators to “preserve the health of this vital economic activity.” It is based on this perspective that Mr. Blyden wants to promote “proper regulation of limousines as part of a comprehensive passenger-for-hire industry.”

“There needs to be one entity that regulates transportation for hire,” he contended. According to the lawmaker, the bill would not increase red tape but instead simplifies operations. “This bill provides the Commission with an additional revenue source to support and improve its operations,” noted the senator.

Supportive of the overall intent, TCC’s executive director Vernice Gumbs has instead asked that the Commission be named the “Virgin Islands Vehicle for Hire Regulatory Commission.”

Mr. Blyden’s proposed expansion of the Taxi Cab Commission was generally supported by local taxi operators invited to testify on the measure. Kerry Harrigan of Best Taxi agreed that the move would “ensure all forms of passenger transport within our territory adhere to the same high standards of safety and service that we expect from our taxi operators.” Its enactment, he said, would create a “regulated environment, promoting fair competition and supporting local entrepreneurship.” Meanwhile, Mervin Smith supported the proposal but called for additional amendments to further strengthen its provisions.

Their positions stood in stark contrast to those shared by the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs and local limousine operators. DLCA currently maintains oversight of limousine operations, providing business licenses to operators. Senator Blyden blamed DLCA and the TCC for the Virgin Islands’ “current mess.” He contended that DLCA has “consistently failed to develop the promulgate regulations that have official force and standing,” forcing the Legislature to require DLCA to turn over any policy documents to the TCC as part of the new integration.?

DLCA has looked unfavorably upon the request. “The commission is already facing significant operational challenges that could hinder the effective implementation of the proposed legislation,” contended Assistant Commissioner Horace Graham, highlighting the TCC’s [recent troubled history](#). That argument became a common refrain during Tuesday’s meeting. A skeleton staff operates TCC, and Mr. Graham believes “expanding the scope to regulate limousine services

would exacerbate these challenges.” TCC’s lack of automation, too, could lead to “inefficiencies such as slow data processing, higher error rates and a lack of timely response to public inquiries,” argued Mr. Graham.

“We believe that the limousine [industry] in its current configuration in the DLCA does not pose any significant harm or threat to the operations of the Taxi Cab Commission,” he said, opposing Mr. Blyden’s perspective. He maintained the bill would create “additional regulatory burdens” that would distract the TCC from “providing ubiquitous and affordable transportation to the people of the Virgin Islands.”

Mr. Graham has instead asked the Legislature to turn its attention to the ride-share economy as it has the potential to “transform the transportation landscape of the Virgin Islands.” To this end, he told lawmakers that the limousine sector is not the threat that it is made out to be, particularly as it often serves a niche customer base.?

It’s a sentiment shared by Chris Watson, chief executive officer of Tropical Adventure Group. “We believe that further government oversight is unnecessary,” he said, referring to the intent of the bill as “unclear to us.” He took particular umbrage to the proposed dress code that would be instituted if the bill was enacted. “Many operators find that guests and hotels prefer a more relaxed yet professional attire rather than a full suit and bow tie,” testified Mr. Watson. A more casual wardrobe aligns with the “barefoot luxury experience” theme that many resorts want to convey, he said.

Mr. Watson, too, expressed “significant reservations” over TCC’s ability to expand. “We do not support a bill that places our industry under an agency already struggling with its existing responsibilities,” he stated. “To be blunt, this is a terrible idea...I can see absolutely no justification for spending money from the public purse to implement a bill that has absolutely no benefit to the taxpayers of this territory.”

Lawmakers, for their part, were torn. “Isn’t that just an additional burden being placed on this already struggling entity?” wondered Senator Milton Potter. Taxi operators attempted to quell his concerns by saying the integration would create more operating revenue for the embattled TCC. Senator Ray Fonseca remained unconvinced, stating, “I’m not sure that the current Taxi Commission is able to effectively manage this.” Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger was more frank. “This bill doesn’t solve anything,” she said. “The problem does not lie with us constantly creating legislation. The problem lies with enforcement.”

Earlier this year, members of the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance repeated a suggestion that the Taxicab Commission be [once again subsumed under the DCLA](#), demonstrating a seeming lack of consensus among lawmakers on the way forward.

?Meanwhile, during Tuesday’s meeting, Senator Kenneth Gittens believed that the proposal of this legislation could not come sooner. “We act like we are just a rogue community. Nobody wants to get regulated,” he argued. He countered previously raised arguments, stating that “the Taxi Commission just needs some help.” Mr. Gittens was disappointed that the DLCA had not formally promulgated regulations for the industry, and upset that the department was unable to provide data on citations issued to limousine drivers.?

Between fierce opposition and recommendations to strengthen several components of the bill, the proposed legislation was ultimately held in committee, to be called for a vote at the discretion of the chair. Until such time, the status quo of vehicle for hire regulation in the territory will remain unchanged.

