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Senate Advances Bill to Tackle Derelict Vehicle Problem in Virgin Islands

Bill 35-0403, sponsored by Sen. Frett-Gregory, seeks to address abandoned vehicles that devalue neighborhoods and pollute the environment, pushing for stricter regulations and enhanced enforcement

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Senator Donna Frett-Gregory is hopeful that the eventual enactment of Bill 35-0403 will combat the “vexing issues that we have here in the territory with regards to abandoned and derelict vehicles.” According to the outgoing St. Thomas senator who has worked on the draft bill for three and a half years, the measure intends to “reinststate Virgin Islands pride.”

In her introduction of the bill on Tuesday, Frett-Gregory acknowledged that Senator-elect Avery Lewis had worked diligently to chip away at the derelict vehicle issue in St. Thomas, but opined that “we should not be utilizing government resources to focus on abandoned and derelict vehicles.”

“These eyesores are devaluing our neighborhoods,” she argued. The Legislature lamented that the current system of tagging vehicles for removal “is time-consuming.” Further, current law actually enables vehicle abandonment, Frett-Gregory argued. Bill 35-0403, she said, “attempts to close the loophole and simplifies the process.”

“This is not a third-world country, and we need to ensure that it doesn't look like one,” she asserted.

However, V.I. Department of Public Works Commissioner Derek Gabriel had some issues with the measure. “Our biggest objection to the proposed legislation is our department's lack of enforcement resources to carry out the specified directives,” he shared. DPW anticipates needing “significant additional funding and resources dedicated solely to fulfill the proposed requirements.”

He further advised that the bill clearly delineates that the V.I. Police Department would be the primary enforcement agency for this law. Mr. Gabriel also called for “clear guidance” on which entity would collect fines, and what the proceeds would be used for. Additionally, DPW encouraged the bill’s sponsor to specify who would be responsible for drafting regulations relevant to the law. Notwithstanding the articulated issues, the department does support the bill as a whole, Mr. Gabriel said.

So does the VIPD. Traffic Commander Joycelyn Lee Bobb observed that derelict and abandoned vehicles are not only unsightly but “can also obstruct roadways, create hazards for drivers and continue to contribute to environmental pollution.” The VIPD has recorded a 27% increase in the number of abandoned vehicles across the territory, she told lawmakers.

Meanwhile, Our Town Frederiksted, represented by Shomari Moorehead, opined that the bill “does not go far enough in providing a comprehensive solution.” He urged that “enforcement mechanisms should be robust and well funded” to “guarantee that the provisions of the law are applied uniformly and effectively.” He suggested that the bill introduce limits on the number of inoperable vehicles allowed on private property, and proposed that “liens should be placed on properties for unpaid penalties.”

Exemptions to the law should be approved by both the Department of Planning and Natural Resources and adjacent property owners, Mr. Moorehead advised. He further encouraged the establishment of a government junkyard “managed by an approved vendor who could generate revenue for the government” with the recycling or sale of vehicle parts. He advocated for “stronger penalties for non-compliance, coupled with incentives for property owners who responsibly remove and recycle these vehicles,”

Senator Javan James was a staunch advocate for increasing monetary penalties relating to abandoned vehicles, calling those who engage in the practice “outright nasty.” He suggested that the fee for a first offense be “way higher than \$500....We have to send a strong message to individuals.” He added, “We need to create a deterrent where individuals know that if I leave my vehicle, I understand that I can't pay my rent.” The lawmaker urged the bill’s sponsor to make the penalties “uncomfortable for people.”

“Anybody who leaves these vehicles on the side of the road and doing these things shouldn't be singing Virgin Islands Nice,” Senator James contended. Similar sentiments were shared by Senator Dwayne DeGraff. “The Virgin Islands has become a dump. It's terrible,” he remarked pointedly. “If anybody in the Virgin Islands is happy with how the territory looks, trust me, something [is] wrong with your eyesight.”

Sens. James and DeGraff went on to join other members of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety in voting the bill onward to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary. Meanwhile, bill sponsor Frett-Gregory has promised to continue dialogue with stakeholders and has encouraged community input on developing additional strategies to rid the territory of abandoned and derelict vehicles.

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