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Bill to Raise Traffic Violation Fees and Create Impound Lot Held in Committee Due to VIPD No-Show

Sponsored by Sen. Gittens, the bill aims to deter unsafe driving by increasing fines and establishing an impound lot, but lack of VIPD attendance and criticism from Sen. Alma Francis Heyliger over insufficient data led to the bill being held

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VIPD performing traffic enforcement in downtown Christiansted earlier this month. By. VIPD

A bill seeking to increase penalties for traffic violations and establish the V.I. Police Department Impound Lot was held in committee on Wednesday after VIPD team members failed to attend the meeting.

Members of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety belatedly learned that VIPD mistakenly believed the meeting was cancelled. Daphne O’Neal, director of the Office of Highway Safety, was the only representative in attendance, but she could not respond to several questions posed by lawmakers during the meeting – topics typically in the purview of VIPD’s traffic commanders.

Nonetheless, most lawmakers expressed general support for Bill 35-0417, sponsored by committee chair Senator Kenneth Gittens. If eventually enacted, it would establish the impound lot and increase fees for several traffic violations. In his introduction of the measure, Gittens explained that the bill would address “public safety concerns” and improve “the effective operation of all our law enforcement agencies.”

The bill’s sponsor outlined five functions of the draft legislation, including creating a “deterrence and improving compliance with our traffic laws by raising fines for offenders and repeated offenders.” This, Gittens said, would “foster safer driving behaviors.” Currently, traffic fines start as low as \$30, but under the new schedule fee minimums will be raised to \$100 or more. More serious offenses, such as leaving the scene of an accident that has caused personal injury and property damage, would attract fines of as much as \$1500, up from \$500.

Secondly, the establishment of the impound lot is expected to “support the enforcement of traffic laws by all law enforcement entities.” Vehicles involved in violations, abandoned and unregistered cars, and those threatening public safety would all be stored in the lot. Storage and administrative fees would go towards the maintenance and upkeep of the impound facility.

The bill will also appropriate funding for the relevant law enforcement agencies to ensure they are well-resourced to carry out their new functions. The measure also seeks to support crime prevention initiatives within VIPD by allocating a portion of the newly increased fines to those activities. “These programs are essential to diverting young people from criminal activities,” Gittens remarked.

Despite their notable absence, the bill was supported by the VIPD. Ms. O’Neal agreed that “the lack of a centralized impound facility hampers the VIPD’s ability to enforce critical measures such as confiscation of vehicles used in serious traffic violations.” She described the impound lot as a “practical solution that aligns with best practices in law enforcement agencies across the country.” Together with an increase in fees, Ms. O’Neal said the legislation would “send a clear message that traffic violations will not be tolerated.”

However, Senator Alma Francis Heyliger had reservations about the measure, demanding that data be presented to justify the increase in fees. “You’re asking me to increase fees when we don’t know what type of impact any type of fee collection has had,” she complained. Heyliger was also disappointed that nobody from VIPD was present to answer any questions. “There’s nobody here to even tell me what is the justification for moving from \$75 to \$100,” she noted. “Did we see an increase of more people doing this particular traffic violation, and do we need to increase these fees, or are we just saying ‘Let’s just do it across the board because we feel like it?’” she questioned.

“I am going to be honest, I have zero information because there’s no one here to tell us anything,” Sen. Heyliger continued. “I cannot be an irresponsible senator and just vote willy-nilly to increase fines without any data, without any testimony,” she declared.

Ms. O’Neal could not say for certain when last penalties were increased, nor could she answer questions from Senator Franklin Johnson on whether a temporary impound lot existed on St.

Thomas. Though she promised to present that information at a later time, Sen. Johnson expressed “disappointment in Public Safety [for] not having the traffic commanders from each island here to support you.”

While Gittens was also disappointed that the VIPD was ill-prepared, he told his colleagues that the measure is not an irresponsible one. “We are trying to address something that is obviously problematic,” he noted. Despite Bill 35-0417 being held at the call of the chair, it is likely to be re-introduced during the 36th Legislature, where the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety will be chaired by Senator-elect Clifford A. Joseph.

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