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## Taxi Stand Lease Bill Held as Lawmakers Weigh Opposition, Internal Division in St. John Taxi Industry

**A proposal to lease government land to the St. John Taxi Services Corporation was held in committee after independent drivers raised fairness concerns and internal complaints revealed fractures within the association's own membership.**

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**Cruz Bay taxi stand, St. John.**

The Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance has voted to hold a lease agreement that would grant the St. John Taxi Services Corporation legal authority to operate its taxi stand in Cruz Bay. Strong opposition from independent operators as well as internal challenges, were among the issues that gave lawmakers pause.

Bill 36-0092, sponsored by Senator Angel Bolques, attempted to grant a 20-year lease to the Corporation for the parcel of government-owned land that has historically been used as the Cruz Bay taxi stand without any lease agreement with the Department of Property and Procurement. “This lack of formal lease is an administrative oversight, and it presents a tangible, legal and financial liability to the Government of the Virgin Islands,” Bolques remarked.

The St. John Taxi Services Corporation originally sought a lease in 2023. The DPP, instead, “offered the organization a “one-year revocable license agreement,” ratified in September 2024. Now, the department has acquiesced to the corporation's request for a 20-year lease. The agreement includes two five-year renewal terms. As written, a tiered system would be applied to rent.

Annual rent payments for the first two years are expected to be \$9,600 each. In the third and fourth years, the rent will increase to \$12,000. In the fifth year, the corporation will be billed \$14,400, all payable in monthly installments. Thereafter, rent will be reviewed “in accordance with the increases of the Consumer Price Index,” according to DPP Assistant Commissioner Vincent Richards.

The lease, Mr. Richards said, will “contribute to the ongoing growth of the United States Virgin Islands.”

Sean Claxton, the corporation’s president, agreed. “A long-term lease will ensure stability, support small businesses,” he testified. The corporation is 34 members strong. “A 20-year lease will give the association the stability it needs to grow effectively,” he stated. “This lease is not only an investment in the association, but is an investment in a dependable community, rooted transportation for St. John.”

The corporation considered the tiered rent agreement fair. “We appreciate that on an annual basis, expenses and revenues will scale proportionally as the association continues to stabilize and grow,” he told the committee.

He would later tell Senator Milton Potter that “we actually prepared to pay the first five years immediately.” When the lawmaker inquired about revenue, Mr. Claxton replied, “we really don't share our financial business on the street, but the association is not broke.”

But while Mr. Claxton and the corporation’s members were hopeful for a successful outcome, independent taxi operators in St. John warned lawmakers not to grant the lease request.

Carmen Wesselhoft could not attend Wednesday’s meeting, but submitted testimony that was read into the record. Attached was a petition signed by those who “vehemently oppose this body giving a lease to any entity for this public taxi stand.” She reminded lawmakers that the existing taxi stand is “a public taxi stand which was made law by former Senator Cleone Creque Maynard back in 1980.” Ms. Wesselhoft urged that “this public taxi stand should not be leased out” as a means to ensure all operations are “given an equal opportunity to operate fairly.” “St. John is too small and limited in choices to operate from to give one group a lease,” her testimony read.

Mr. Claxton downplayed the significance of the petition. “It's only like 35% of these people that signed the list are actually driving,” he claimed.

However, one signatory to the petition against the lease is a St. John Taxi Services Corporation member himself. By his own admission, Patrick Hendrickson was placed on a two-week suspension by the corporation for a traffic infraction while off duty. In his testimony, he also

complained about being chastised for being out of uniform. “I don't think there's nothing wrong with how I'm dressed...and I was sent home.”

“Some of the members of the Taxi Service Association provoke some taxi drivers,” he told lawmakers. “This lease for 20 years is a no-no due to the fact how the members were treated,” Mr. Henderickson testified.

These complaints dominated much of the discussion at Wednesday's meeting, with lawmakers taking turns to comment on how the Corporation and independent operations could better work together. Currently, independent operators can ply their trade at the Cruz Bay taxi stand, but must pay a \$20 daily fee compared to the \$10 fee paid by members. Investigations into the corporation's by-laws, suspension procedures, and drivers' hesitation to join the corporation dominated the conversation.

“If you have so many independent taxi drivers, if you join the association, you could bring about change because you got numbers,” Senator Kurt Vialet advised Mr. Hendrickson. “You all need to learn how to get along and be able to service those tourists in a structured setting. It can't be this argument. You guys have enough food. Everybody could eat.” Mr. Vialet would later vote to advance the bill to the next legislative stage.

“I really think that we need to have a moment to resolve some of these issues internally because it could erupt into something bigger,” noted Senator Carla Joseph. Senator Milton Potter agreed. “I would hate to see an issue like this further tear an industry that is still in the hands of indigenous Virgin Islanders,” he decried. “Division is going to cause problems in this territory,” Senator Dwayne DeGraff added.

“I think it should be usage for all,” said committee chair Senator Novelle Francis. “I have a little concern about the cost for members and non-members. I don't think that it should be a doubling of that cost.”

With the bill ultimately held in committee to facilitate further discussion and refinement, its sponsor, Sen. Bolques, called for “further focus” to identify a “middle point.” “It's relatively very important that we secure this taxi stand for our people,” he said.