

BMV to Target Reckless Drivers with Points System, Overhaul Commercial Licenses, and Tighten Oversight on Unregistered Vehicles

As part of its \$6.4M budget plan, the BMV aims to speed up license suspensions with a retooled points system, address delays in launching commercial driver licenses, and crack down on unregistered vehicles amid rising enforcement concerns.

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Barbara Jackson McIntosh at Tuesday's BMV budget hearing. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

The Bureau of Motor Vehicles is preparing to crack down on dangerous and negligent driving in the coming fiscal year as work gets underway to “improve on our points system.” That was the testimony of BMV director Barbara Jackson McIntosh when she appeared before the Committee

on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Tuesday.

For the new fiscal year, the BMV is requesting a budget of \$6,486,954, which includes \$3,596,365 from the general fund, \$1,890,589 from the Personalized License Plate (PLP) Fund and \$1 million from the Bureau of Motor Vehicles Fund.

According to McIntosh, the general fund and BMV Fund will cover personnel costs, while the PLP Fund will be used for operating expenses, supplies, utilities, and the like. BMV projects revenue collections in the sum of \$10,550,813, with \$7,844,179 already collected as of July 1.

The strengthening of the points system is not budgeted against any of these funds. Instead, the BMV is in receipt of a grant from the Office of Highway Safety for the project, valued at \$237,089. With internal processes completed, “implementation is currently pending a critical legislative amendment,” said Ms. McIntosh. Under the current law, “a driver who accumulates 12 or more points must have their license suspended through a formal petition to the court by the director of BMV.” If amended, the law will grant the director of the BMV the authority to “administratively suspend the license once the 12 point threshold is reached, eliminating the need for court intervention.”

Ms. McIntosh told a querying Senator Angel Bolques Jr. that “we have another year” to expend the grant funds. She remains confident that the Legislature will support the amendment to the law, but said that the point system enhancement would proceed with or without legislative action. She did note, however, concern from the Office of the Attorney General over the “extra workload of petitions that they now have to take to court.” That additional hurdle means “suspensions will not happen as fast as you will like them,” Director McIntosh stated.

Senator Avery Lewis confirmed that the relevant draft legislature is “before legal counsel. “Pretty soon we’ll be hearing it,” he affirmed, seeking to allay DOJ qualms.

The BMV has also “begun the preliminary work for the development and implementation of the Virgin Islands commercial driver's license.” According to Ms. McIntosh’s testimony, “the process is slower than planned because of the various pieces and parts that must be considered.” That includes entry level driver training, testing records, updating the BMV’s website, driving school accreditation, a commercial driver’s license manual, and public information and education.

Senator Kurt Violet was interested in the procedure, which Ms. McIntosh confirmed will be a “lengthy process.” “Unfortunately, it’s not a system where we could grandfather people in,” she noted. Violet then wondered what would become of truck drivers operating in that capacity for decades. “How are we going to be able to bridge that gap that they understand it’s just more than driving, there are also safety issues?” he asked Ms. McIntosh. BMV’s plan, she said, “is to basically train these individuals.”

“It’s a huge lift,” observed Senator Marvin Blyden, after BMV could not immediately respond to the number of drivers who would need to undergo the new licensing procedure.

Lawmakers have also urged the BMV to crack down on the enforcement of vehicle registration. “You mentioned that the lost revenues can be up to potentially \$1.5 million,” remarked Senator Ray Fonseca. For Ms. McIntosh, “we all agree it’s an enforcement issue and that’s basically all I can say about the issue.” The BMV informs the V.I Police Department of vehicles with unpaid registration and expects that they will conduct the necessary enforcement action.

That conversation prompted Sen. Violet to ask the BMV director whether her agency could benefit from its own enforcement arm. However, when the lawmaker outlined a possible job role of having someone stationed at the ports, issuing a special permit to newly imported vehicles, and following up on the status of registration, Ms. McIntosh noted that “any one of our administrative positions could do that,” and said that it was the department's intention to station an official near the port on St. Croix to handle the issuance of special permits and related matters.

“Our long-term vision for the BMV is a continuous improvement of our delivery of service through automation, the reduction of redundant processes and the professional development of our staff,” Ms. McIntosh told lawmakers. Small projects include a major “paper reduction initiative,” a cost-cutting measure which is expected to be implemented in August.