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Lawmakers Chide Taxicab Commission, Citing No Enforcement, Revenue Shortfalls, and Ongoing Dysfunction

Despite a \$556K budget request, the Taxicab Commission admitted it needs \$1.5M to function, but lawmakers blasted the agency for lacking enforcement officers, relying on paper systems, falling short on revenues, and failing to resolve years-old debts.

Senate / **Published On August 19, 2025 06:40 AM /**

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Taxis at the Cyril E. King Airport on April 30, 2023 at 1:39 p.m. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

Despite new leadership for the past six months, the Virgin Islands Taxicab Commission (TCC) remains operationally challenged, struggling with zero enforcement officers and an outdated, paper-based system. Their budget of approximately half a million dollars is just a third of what the agency truly needs to function, acting executive director Melissa Smith told lawmakers on Monday.

Ms. Smith appeared before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance to defend the Commission's \$556,043 FY2026 request. She made it immediately clear, however, that the sum "does not meet the operational funding needs of the Commission." For a functional Taxicab Commission, she told lawmakers that the "minimum projection is set at \$1.5 million."

With almost \$1 million less than it requires, Ms. Smith says TCC's regulatory arm consists of only two filled positions and is virtually "non-existent." There are no enforcement officers, which leaves the Commission "facing several significant challenges which are impacting its ability to effectively regulate and support the taxi industry." Illegal taxi operations are increasing, Ms. Smith said, with a notable surge in unlicensed taxi operators.

Compounding matters, the TCC's "manual, paper-based customer system" is contributing to delays in customer service and revenue collection. Upgrading TCC's technology to a state-of-the-art system could cost as much as \$400,000, a sum obviously not accounted for in its FY 2026 budget request. Relying on the agency's skeleton staff to prepare paper documentation, the Commission has only collected \$298,442 as of June 2025. Ms. Smith could not produce updated figures, but assured lawmakers that TCC would come close to its projected revenue of \$550,000 by the end of the fiscal year.



From left to right, TCC Acting Executive Director Melissa Smith, and Board Chair Elizabeth Hansen-Watley. (Credit: V.I. Legislature)

Lawmakers were extremely concerned about the lack of any enforcement staff, whose absence means that potential citation fees for infractions go uncollected. Ms. Smith attempted to pacify lawmakers' ire, explaining that she personally responds to complaints and gives "direct warnings" to unlicensed taxi operators. TCC is also receiving "real-time assistance" from the V.I. Police Department and the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs.

A formal memorandum of understanding for enforcement support with these agencies has been "discussed on the surface," Ms. Smith told committee chair Senator Novelle Francis. "We know that it has to be solidified." Indeed, the Commission's board of directors has directed the acting

executive director to arrange something “tangible.”

Senator Dwayne DeGraff, attempting to offer enforcement solutions, suggested that the Commission hire inspectors. It's a position that he believed existed previously. But as he learned from Ms. Smith, the Commission has decided to combine the position of enforcement officer and inspector. It's worth noting that enforcement officers must be trained peace officers, a process that could take as many as nine to ten months. It means that while the Division of Personnel will soon advertise three Taxi Inspectors (Enforcement Officers) positions, boots won't hit the ground until mid-2026 unless an already-sworn peace officer decides to apply.

For Senator Francis, the Taxicab Commission is “shortchanging” itself by “waiting for enforcement officers/ inspectors.” He informed Ms. Smith and the Board's chair, Elizabeth Hansen-Watley, that the Commission could employ a strategy that mirrors the VIPD. The Police Department employs auxiliary officers and community service officers who do not require the same level of training as full-fledged officers. “You don't need every one of those individuals to have a badge and a gun in order to be able to carry out the task and responsibility,” he urged.

According to Ms. Hansen-Watley, the decision to combine the roles was based on “budgetary concerns.” Per Senator Francis's observation, hiring an inspector in the first instance will benefit the Commission as they will “pay 75% of what you'll pay for an enforcement officer.” It's a recommendation that Ms. Smith believes “would work.”

However, that would only solve one of TCC's myriad of issues. Ms. Smith is still counting on the goodwill of the Legislature to eventually provide \$1.5 million in operational funding to effectively rebuild. Though the Commission previously received annual allotments of approximately \$1 million, funding was slashed due to the TCC's inability to properly account for its operations. Now, Ms. Smith says \$1.5 million is a “low-ball projection.”

Senator Hubert Frederick felt differently. “I'm trying to justify finding more money for your organization at this time, and I think we're still rebuilding,” he told Ms. Smith. “You just need to get some of the basics done.”

Senator Carla Joseph argued in favor of the TCC's petition for more money, however. “I believe you're on the right track. You just need to tighten up a few items, and I know funding would help you do that,” she said to Ms. Smith. It was one of the only comforting statements that the Commission's leadership would receive. Sen. Joseph would later reverse course, reminding Ms. Smith that TCC is a revenue-generating entity. “You're not supposed to come here to ask us for no money,” she stated.

Senator Kurt Vialet employed a curt tone. “This is total dysfunction,” he told Ms. Smith. This is dismantling of an entity that made substantial money, that has come down to next to nothing.” He thought back to 2018, when the Commission collected as much as \$825,000. He theorized that the Commission would not collect its \$550,000 projected revenue by the end of September. “You're going to spend less than \$300,000, so even the \$556,000 you can't spend, but you want \$1.5 million,” he said, scolding the Commission's leadership.

“The Commission has just, systematically, been destroyed through poor leadership, through poor guidance,” Mr. Vialet argued. “We got to be fooling ourselves. We have these entities coming before us and are not being responsible in generating the revenues necessary for this government, and then want to use general funds,” he declared.

“Before you get any additional money from this body, you need to show that you have the ability to hire and to spend the \$500,000 that you have now,” Senator Violet asserted.

Like other entities, the TCC has outstanding vendor payments. Its debt, estimated at \$7,745, is minuscule compared to others, but some payments are as old as five to six years. With funds available to them, it is unclear why those debts have not been cleared.

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