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## “People Don’t Walk With Cash Anymore”: Senators Urge St. John Taxi Drivers to Go Digital Before 2026 Cruise Boom

At a town hall led by Senator Angel Bolques Jr., lawmakers and tourism officials warned that without adopting card and app payments, local taxi drivers risk losing business as 80 cruise calls and nearly 2 million visitors head to the island next year.

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Several small cruise ships anchored in open waters, symbolizing the growth of global cruise travel and the increasing flow of visitors to island destinations. By. GETTY IMAGES.

With an estimated 80 cruise calls scheduled for St. John in 2026, lawmakers are urging taxi drivers to rethink their approach and improve service offerings. Chief among the recommendations was the adoption of modern payment methods for fares.

On Tuesday evening, taxi drivers filed into the Cleone H. Creque Legislative Conference Room for the second in a series of town hall meetings organized by the Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports and Parks. According to committee chair Senator Angel Bolques Jr., visitor estimates for the upcoming cruise season are as high as 1.8 million, and he wants as many as possible to become return guests.

“That means more business for you; higher ferry transfers from St. Thomas. We need to be ready for that,” said Bolques. A big part of readiness is being accessible, incorporating technology, and expanding accepted payment methods beyond cash.

“I need you to think about it and be open minded about it, because accepting different forms of payments means more money for you and your families,” he said. Mr. Bolques referenced social media content from travel influencers where “100% of them complained about the fact that they could not pay a taxi with a card or Apple Pay.”

“People don't walk with cash anymore...so you must accept more than one type of payment — that's the bottom line,” said Senator Marvin Blyden. “Times are changing, and we must change with the times.”

“Truth be told, you're going to lose out if you don't start to accept another form of payment,” Elizabeth Hansen Watley, Taxicab Commission chair and assistant tourism commissioner, warned. “I don't want it to be a situation where we just age out of a system because we're not willing to conform,” she added. Though aware that there are “many taxi drivers who are willing to take a second payment option,” Ms. Hansen-Watley says greater adoption is needed. She pledged the government's support to assist drivers who are not familiar with navigating such technological advancements.

According to taxi drivers who ply their trade along St. John's roads, however, there are a number of infrastructural issues hindering their digital transformation.

According to taxi operator Carmen Wesselhoft-Hedrington, “the payment plan option is very difficult.” She informed lawmakers that “after you leave Cruz Bay, you have no service.” Therefore, while some drivers have adopted payment platforms like Zelle or Venmo, or even have card machines on hand, “it's very hard” to use them effectively. “Sometimes, you can't even make a phone call in the case of an emergency,” she lamented.

The East End Taxi has found a workaround, placing a card machine at their office. “If a driver cannot collect credit card, his thing is to talk to that passenger, take them in the office,” their representative explained. East End Taxi has also developed an app for taxi drivers that can be used by visitors to simplify access to that service.

Notwithstanding these positive developments, there is much work to be done to advance the taxi sector, say lawmakers.

“We're looking at the customer service. We're looking at enhancing the driver training and certification, the modernization of the entire taxi industry, the resolution of the industry conflicts and regulating the fares,” Senator Kenneth Gittens summarized. He took particular umbrage with the lack of fare standardization, declaring that some drivers charge “some ridiculous price” for

trips while others assess a more reasonable fee for transportation to the same location.

There is also an emerging need for taxi drivers to be well-versed in Virgin Islands history and culture. Senator Avery Lewis said he is aware that some drivers “really don’t know the history of the place.” “These are people who embarrassing us, for lack of a better word,” he stated. “Some of the information we’re spewing out there, and some of the things that they’re saying to the customers is inaccurate.”

Lewis has apparently also learned of some drivers who tell visitors that other Caribbean islands are more appealing. “We have to promote the Virgin Islands: St. Thomas, St. John, St. Croix, and Water Island. We have to promote our place,” he insisted.

“A one-time visitor does not grow our economy. We have to encourage them to come back,” agreed Senator Bolques.

The external challenges to the industry outside the control of taxi drivers are not just limited to difficult topography, however. The proliferation of “gypsy” cabs is another threat facing bona fide taxi operators. It’s something that the Taxicab Commission, despite its limited staffing complement, is trying to crack down on.

“We have done this case study to investigate the most prominent areas that we have illegal activity and gypsy in so that we can target those areas,” said Ms. Hansen-Watley. She is well aware that enforcement is the only solution. The Commission has “been coordinating with VIPD to make sure that we know the high traffic areas for gypsying,” disclosed the VITCC chair.

Bolstering the capacity of the Taxicab Commission and revising existing law to address ride-sharing are among the crucial fixes needed for one of the last locally owned industries, meeting attendees agreed.