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Push to Modernize V.I. Taxicab Commission Halted as Finance Warns Against Using Tourism Fund

The V.I. Dept. of Finance said diverting \$400,000 from the Tourism Fund could disrupt payments to vendors and advised the Commission to improve revenue collection, adopt cashless payments, and complete financial audits first.

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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.

An attempt to provide desperately needed funding to the VI Taxicab Commission was promptly shot down by the V.I. Department of Finance. Officials told lawmakers that the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund, identified as the source of \$400,000 to modernize the TCC, needs to

be reconciled before more obligations can be made against it.

Authored by Senator Angel Bolques, Bill 36-0045 seeks to fund the implementation of technological upgrades at the TCC. The organization currently employs a paper-based system which officials have long admitted [is not fit for purpose](#). He stated the money would help bring the Commission into the 21st Century by “replacing outdated, inefficient systems with digital tools that serve both the agency and the operators as it regulates them.” He described the Commission’s current operations as “basically outdated and broken.”

“Relying on fragile paper records is a risk we can no longer afford,” Senator Bolques stated. He also complained about the inordinate amount of time wasted while trying to conduct business at the Commission, calling it “unacceptable for working professionals whose income depends on their time on the road.” The funding would allow the Bureau of Information Technology to implement a digitized system for the Commission’s operations.

But while the Department of Finance considered the bill’s intent as a “reasonable and forward-looking policy goal,” Executive Assistant Commissioner Maurice Wells said that diverting funds from the TARF would “risk interruptions, vendor non-payment, and potential harm to the tourism sector, especially during peak seasons.”

Instead, he suggested actions that the Commission could employ to place itself on a better economic footing. They included “daily electronic reconciliation,” adopting “centralized cash handling,” or transitioning “aggressively towards a cashless payment system to minimize loss,” and conducting “thorough internal and external financial audits.” Mr. Wells also advised that the Commission review its operations to identify new revenue opportunities.

Mr. Wells testified that the Finance Department is currently reconciling the TARF, the result of which may “significantly adjust the reported fund balance.” It’s why he urged the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance to identify an alternate funding source. Mr. Wells insisted that utilizing the fund could create “a risk of a deficit and impair its ability to meet existing and future expenditure obligations.”

Figures from the Legislature’s Post Audit Division place the fund balance in the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund at just over \$64 million. Senator Avery Lewis was puzzled as to why \$400,000 could not be obligated toward TCC’s digital upgrades.

Reminding Senator Lewis of the reconciliation process, Mr. Wells maintained that DOF is “not going to be held to that \$64 million right now.” He was also unable to provide a definitive date for the conclusion of the reconciliation process. “When it’s done, we’ll be sure to furnish that information to this body, but it’s ongoing,” he said.

Senator Bolques argued that the process should have been completed long ago. “This is something we heard back in 2023. It is now 2025, going to the end of the year,” he fretted. Bolques argued that the incomplete reconciliation exercise is “now prohibiting us as legislators to do our jobs.”

The request to allocate funding from the TARF divided lawmakers. Senator Novelle Francis, the committee’s chair, admitted that he was “very hesitant about tinkering with our funding sources at a time like this without ensuring that we have funding to have our needs met.”

Senator Francis suggested that TCC’s “focus should really be on staffing up.” The Commission continues to work with a skeleton staff of only three, a number that includes acting executive director Melissa Smith. She testified that the Commission’s current paper-based operation “limits

its effectiveness and efficiency.”

Beefing up the Commission would allow it to “go out and do the enforcement and build the revenues that’s necessary for us to have a return on the investment,” Francis insisted. Ms. Smith informed him that interviews for new employees are scheduled to take place “shortly.”

Senator Blyden, too, advocated for hiring enforcement staff in particular. Doing so would ensure that TCC can “collect those revenues and make sure you’re keeping everyone in line,” he said. In more productive years, the Taxicab Commission generated as much as \$800,000. Earnings have now been slashed to an annual average of \$200,000, a sobering update provided by the acting executive director.

Nonetheless, he described the request captured in Bill 36-0045 as an “excellent investment.”

However, according to Mr. Wells, such an investment is long-term and thus requires requisite funding.

“We’re looking at the \$400,000 as a minor investment. But at the end of the day, that’s not the end figure,” he stated. “We don’t think about the maintenance aspect. We don’t think about the various phases,” Mr. Wells explained.

Ms. Smith told lawmakers that she had not begun a new procurement process. Instead, she used “historical research” from previously submitted RFPs to determine the cost of the digitization project. However, Senator Avery Lewis was not convinced that the \$400,000 figure would be sufficient, referencing previous experience in digitizing files. Bureau of Information Technology Director Rupert Ross explained that their intention is to “work from a point forward.”

Despite the TCC’s and Senator Bolques’s best efforts to convince lawmakers of the need to fund the digitization, the bill was held in committee. It is expected that a new funding source will be identified, as all stakeholders agree that technological upgrades for the organization are long overdue.