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## Taxi Cab Commission Modernization Bill Held After Officials Say Separate Funding and Vendor Plan Are Already in Motion

Senator Angel Bolques sought \$400,000 from the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund to modernize the Taxi Cab Commission, but Finance and OMB officials said a separate vendor solution has already been approved with \$62,508 identified.

Government / **Published On June 09, 2026 06:20 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **June 09, 2026**

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**Taxis in Christiansted, St. Croix. By. V.I. PORT AUTHORITY.**

A bill seeking to appropriate \$400,000 from the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund to modernize the Taxi Cab Commission was held in the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Monday after administration officials said a separate vendor solution is already being

pursued with a smaller amount of funding identified.

Bill 36-0045, sponsored by Senator Angel Bolques, had been heard once before. On Monday, Mr. Bolques again argued that the Commission's systems remain outdated and that taxi operators continue to be affected by slow, largely paper-based services.

"For more than three years, I've been advocating for the modernization of the Taxi Cab Commission because I believe our operators deserve better," he said. Senator Bolques said that while the world has "moved forward into a digital age," the Commission continues to lag behind. He drew attention to taxi operators who must rely on the Commission's slow service.

"Modernizing the taxicab commission is not simply a transportation issue; it is a tourism issue; it is an economic development issue. It is a customer service issue, and most importantly, it is a fairness issue," Senator Bolques stated.

The push for support, however, came amid continuing uncertainty over the proposed funding source. Finance Commissioner Kevin McCurdy has stated on multiple occasions that the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund needs to be audited.

In testimony on Monday, Commissioner McCurdy said that while modernizing taxi technology is a "reasonable and forward-looking policy goal...we do not recommend approving the transfer of \$400,000 from the Tourism Fund for this purpose."

He explained that the fund, commonly referred to as the TARF, is "dedicated to supporting tourism-related contractual obligations, seasonal cash-flow needs, and ongoing program commitments."

Mr. McCurdy said modernization "must be pursued in a fiscally responsible and transparent manner that does not jeopardize the tourism sector."

Senator Marvin Blyden later argued that the operations of the Taxi Cab Commission do qualify as tourism operations, noting that taxi drivers are among the first and last people visitors interact with.

The appeal for Bill 36-0045 also came from Melissa Smith, the Commission's executive director. "This bill presents a transformative opportunity to bring the Commission into alignment with modern administrative and regulatory practices," she said.

Ms. Smith described a system in which taxi operators could access services online. A "centralized case management system would allow complaints to be filed digitally," she added. She characterized the proposed \$400,000 allocation as a "strategic investment."

According to Ms. Smith, while the Commission has "taken proactive steps" to modernize and improve internal procedures, those initial efforts must be "supported by modern technological infrastructure to ensure long-term effectiveness and sustainability."

Rupert Ross, director of the Bureau of Information Technology, did not take a position on the funding source, but agreed that the Commission needs to catch up with the digital age. BIT has already provided some support toward that effort.

After testimony concluded, Bill 36-0045 was turned over to committee members for discussion.

“We expect a lot from you, but we're not giving you any funding, and every time we try to find funding, we can't reconcile the account,” Senator Hubert Frederick said.

According to Commissioner McCurdy, “reconciliation may significantly adjust the reported fund balance and will provide a more accurate representation of the fund’s ability to sustain the current break-even trend.”

Still, Senator Frederick said, “I'm gonna go ahead and take a chance...Hopefully we have the money.”

Commissioner McCurdy later emphasized that “the fund balance could say a billion dollars, [but] bank balance is what is important to all of us.”

As the discussion continued, Mr. McCurdy disclosed that the Office of Management and Budget and the Department of Finance are already in the process of contracting a modernization service for the Taxi Cab Commission. It was unclear why that effort had not been mentioned in Mr. McCurdy’s testimony, even as he offered alternatives to using the TARF.

“We have this vendor that we've already connected with Taxi Cab...We're trying to come up with the funding, so that they do get some of those automation and modernization in place,” he said, hours into the discussion.

OMB Director Julio Rhymer provided additional context. “They just provided us a quote, we just approved the quote, and this will be redundant in regards to actually putting \$400,000 on top of it.”

Ms. Smith confirmed that she was aware of the vendor interested in “assisting the taxicab commission with the POS system.” She told the Committee that “I'm gracious, and I am open to that option.”

Mr. Rhymer said OMB and the Department of Finance have identified \$62,508 in funding.

“This vendor is actually providing an option that actually takes her to the 20-first century instantly,” he said.

“We're trying to help her, not just sitting here as the Commissioner of Finance and the Director of OMB, saying, “Well, don't give her the money.” We are already providing a solution. That's what we try to do,” Mr. Rhymer stated.

With lawmakers appearing satisfied that OMB and the Department of Finance should be allowed to proceed with the proposed solution for the Taxi Cab Commission, the Committee voted to hold the bill, easing pressure on the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund.