

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Two New Taxi Inspectors Issue 53 Citations as Commission Seeks \$1M More for Enforcement and Technology

Melissa Smith says current funding cannot support the Taxicab Commission's duties as cruise arrivals and enforcement demands grow. The agency wants more inspectors and staff, while projecting at least \$500,000 in FY 2027 collections if staffing expands.

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Taxis at the Cyril E. King Airport in St. Thomas, USVI. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

The V.I. Taxicab Commission is asking lawmakers to increase its fiscal year 2027 budget to approximately \$1.5 million, saying its approved \$554,637 operating budget is insufficient to adequately staff the agency, expand enforcement, improve collections and replace outdated paper-based systems.

Executive Director Melissa Smith told the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance that an additional \$1 million is needed for the commission to “effectively fulfil its statutory responsibilities,” maintaining that current funding levels “do not adequately support the operational needs of the agency.”

The approved FY 2027 operating budget totals \$554,637, inclusive of \$395,603 from the Taxi Revolving Fund and \$160,440 from the Tourism Revolving Fund.

Smith said the larger \$1.5 million request reflects “staffing, enforcement, technology, and infrastructure requirements.”

Sen. Kurt Vialet questioned where the “additional \$950,000” would come from.

Smith responded that “it’s an ask because we are not a traditional revenue-generating agency. We are an enforcement agency.”

Commission Says Current Staffing Is Insufficient

A major portion of the requested funding would be used to increase staffing.

Smith described the commission's current staffing level as “simply insufficient to regulate an industry that serves millions of passengers annually.”

Positions the agency says it needs include additional taxi inspectors, an assistant director, a collections clerk and an “administrative secretary II upgrade.”

Smith said increasing cruise ship traffic will place additional pressure on the commission.

As cruise arrivals continue increasing, “enforcement demands will increase as well.”

She told lawmakers that “adequate staffing is critical to ensuring fair competition, consumer protection, and industry compliance.”

Additional enforcement personnel would be positioned “strategically throughout the areas and hotspots.”

Two Inspectors Have Issued 53 Citations

The commission has already hired two taxi inspectors on St. Thomas.

Smith intends for both to attend a police class early next year so they can qualify as peace officers.

Their presence has already affected illegal taxi activity, she told lawmakers.

The addition of the inspectors has “resulted in a noticeable decrease in the reporting and operations of illegal taxi services,” Ms. Smith said.

Sen. Dwayne DeGraff questioned whether sending the existing inspectors through police training would be the best approach.

He warned that taking them away from their current duties could mean the commission would “lose all the revenue they could have generated based on what they have done.”

DeGraff suggested that the commission instead hire separate personnel who could be trained and certified specifically as enforcement officers.

Together, the two current inspectors have issued 53 citations totaling \$10,305.

Of that amount, \$7,500 has already been paid.

Those payments are part of the \$245,624.80 in total revenue collected by the commission as of June 2026.

Smith projects FY 2026 revenue will reach “at least \$350,000.”

Still, she acknowledged that collections “can be improved.”

More Staff Expected to Strengthen Collections

Smith told lawmakers that the commission has already implemented internal changes aimed at improving collections.

She told Sen. Avery Lewis that “the additional improvement would be with the onboarding of more staff for additional internal controls.”

For FY 2027, the commission expects to “at least trend with \$500,000 in collections,” but Smith said reaching that level depends on “additional staff and with the onboarding of new operators.”

Commission Moving Away From Pen and Paper

The Taxicab Commission also wants additional funding to modernize its operations technologically.

The agency is transitioning away from pen-and-paper processes, with assistance from the Office of Management and Budget, Department of Finance and Bureau of Information Technology.

The planned changes include digital records management, secure document storage and automated processing systems.

Smith estimated that modernization will require between \$200,000 and \$400,000.

Sen. Angel Bolques Jr. previously attempted to provide additional funding for that purpose, but the effort has stalled in the Legislature.

OIG Findings Draw Lawmakers' Attention

Lawmakers also questioned Smith about deficiencies identified by the Office of the Inspector General in its review of the Taxicab Commission.

Among the findings was an incomplete taxi medallion registry and concerns regarding the physical condition of medallion records.

OIG also identified cases in which taxi licenses were approved for applicants who did not satisfy examination requirements, including people who failed the required written examination or for whom there was no evidence that the examination had been completed.

Smith told lawmakers that corrective action has been taken.

“we have addressed all of the concerns.”

She said some of the problems had already been identified internally before OIG raised them.

“even prior to the concerns, we had recognized those concerns, so I proactively addressed them.”

Smith told Sen. Marvin Blyden that new controls were being established to prevent previous practices from recurring.

“We don't want to preempt the past. We want to work and grow from there,” Ms. Smith said.

Despite her assurances and the changes she described, Sen. Ray Fonseca said the discussion itself “raises questions about whether the Commission is enforcing its policies and procedures.”

The commission maintains that additional personnel, stronger internal controls, expanded enforcement and technological modernization are needed if it is to meet its regulatory responsibilities as the territory's taxi industry and visitor traffic continue to grow.