

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senate Committee Considers Legislation On Abandoned Vehicles And Senior Discounts For Taxi Drivers

Government / **Published On April 22, 2015 07:06 PM /**

John McCarthy **April 22, 2015**



ST. THOMAS – A Senate committee considered bills to change the language on existing legislation affecting abandoned vehicles and one to give senior discounts to taxi drivers at the Earle B. Otley Legislative Hall Wednesday.

Sen. Justin Harrigan, Sr. was the primary sponsor for each piece of legislation before the Committee on Government Services, Veterans and Consumer Services that he chairs, and after a subdued debate the bills were voted to be held in committee for further consideration.

Bill No. 31-0003, which is co-sponsored by Sen. Novelle Francis, Jr. sought to allow police to ticket abandoned vehicles without current registration stickers and allow the government to recoup the costs of having the vehicles towed and stored.

Harrigan and fellow committee member Sen. Myron Jackson, who said they live in the urban Long Path and Hospital Ground areas respectively of St. Thomas – where narrow roads and population density due to the scarcity of land make every square foot count – said they are intensely affected by abandoned vehicles in their neighborhoods.

“Parking and blight are becoming ever more increasing problems,” Harrigan said.

Jackson brought pictures of three abandoned vehicles in his neighborhood to show the committee and said none of the cars so far have been tagged by police and that one of them has been there for at least a month.

“It sits there due to the demise of the community,” Jackson said, referring to one of the cars he photographed.

The testimony of Long Path resident Helen Edwards was read into the record by the legislative clerk and Edwards said UPS and DHL deliver drivers and taxi drivers refuse to traverse the road by her house because it is so narrow and there is nowhere to stop. Edwards added that garbage pickups are also hampered due to the narrowness of the street and abandoned vehicles congesting it.

Police Commissioner designee Delroy Richards Sr., after listening to all of the testimony on the bill said the creation of an abandoned vehicles task force in the 1990’s could be the reason “why police are not removing abandoned vehicles from the side of the road.”

“My question is: Is there a task force and is it functional?” Richards said.

Darryl Lewis of Property & Procurement said he recently removed abandoned vehicles in downtown Charlotte Amalie and in the time it took to transfer one of the vehicles to the impound lot in Sub Base, someone placed a valid registration sticker on one of the abandoned vehicles to keep it from being removed.

Lewis said even once the vehicles are stored on impound lot they can be stripped of parts or pose a safety and health hazard to children playing because there is a lack of security at the lot and dead and living pests such as rodents and cockroaches after often found in the abandoned vehicles.

Senate President Neville James, also a committee member, commended Lewis’ testimony, saying it highlights the need to amend the bill to include language that allows police to remove abandoned vehicles that have valid registration stickers on them.

“This should not be limited to vehicles that are not registered only, if we’re going to allow for the program to actually have teeth,” James said.

Lewis said vehicles removed from the street are stored at the Sub Base lot for 15 days, during which time the owner can reclaim the vehicle by paying a fine of \$250 to \$1,000 based on the cost of the tow truck and the number of previous offenses the owner has.

He added that he did not think Property & Procurement or the Police Department could currently secure vehicles that have been impounded. Richards said all jurisdictions on the U.S. mainland have a secure impound lot and suggested that establishing them in each district could be a revenue-generating opportunity for the government.

Under questioning from committee member Sen. Sammuel Sanes, Richards said police try to use government wreckers, but if there is a safety issue with an abandoned vehicle blocking traffic, a private wrecker will be sought out if a government wrecker is not immediately available. Richards said the police do not have a contract with any one private towing company on St. Croix and that it “call(s) “around” to all that are publicly listed.

Jackson offered a motion to hold the bill in committee “for additional amendments,” and James, Jackson, Sanes, and Harrigan all voted yes; committee members Sen. Terrance “Positive” Nelson, Sen. Tregenza Roach and Janette Millen Young were absent.

Bill No. 31-0002 was voted by members to be held in committee. It was also co-sponsored by non-committee member Francis, and sought to give 50 percent discounts on licenses to taxi drivers.

Under questioning from Harrigan, Bureau of Motor Vehicles Director designee Anthony Olive said there were 1,225 senior citizen taxi drivers who would be affected by the proposed legislation, and that if it passed it represented a loss to territorial coffers of \$39,812.50.

“I believe the timing might be a little off, because we are trying to raise revenues,” James said.

Olive added that providing such a discount to taxi drivers, who are considered business owners, could open up a “Pandora’s box” that would have all senior citizen entrepreneurs clamoring for discounts when they apply for licenses at the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs.

Harrigan said to vote against the measure would be in essence “sanctioning discrimination for \$39,000.”

But his fellow committee members did not agree, only Harrigan, the bill’s prime sponsor, voted against the motion offered by Sanes that it continue to be held in committee “until further notice.” The motion passed on a 3-1 vote.