

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill To Provide Weekend And Holiday VITRAN Service Passes First Hurdle

VIC News / **Published On July 07, 2015 09:38 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **July 07, 2015**



ST. THOMAS -- Senators almost unanimously approved a measure, bill [No. 31-0133](#) -- an act requiring the commissioner of the Department of Public Works (DPW) to provide VITRAN bus service on weekends and holidays -- sponsored by Sen. Marvin Blyden, who also chairs the Committee on Housing, Public Works and Waste Management at the Earl B. Otley Legislative Hall on Monday.

But the legislation faced opposition from senators who questioned the bill's necessity, and from Commissioner of Public Works Gustav James, who said while the implementation of VITRAN bus runs on weekends and holidays remain a good idea -- and one his department intends to implement -- funding for the initiative would be

problematic because of the fiscal challenges the territory is currently facing.

James said the weekend and holiday service would further impact the operation's bottom line as seniors travel free of charge, however it's a hurdle he'd like DPW to overcome through subsidies provided by the federal government. James also said that while DPW has not been able to adequately assess the cost impact the weekend and holiday service would have on the government because it remains dependent on the amount of runs and routes that would be approved, an assessment would also be carried out before implementation.

To do so, a St. Thomas senator suggested implementing a test run in the St. Thomas/St. John district, however Sen. Novelle Francis, St. Croix Democrat, bucked.

"One of my colleagues suggested that we try a trial route in the district of St. Thomas/St. John, [but] I want to say that any trial being done should be done in all three islands because certainly St. Croix is hurting, and they depend on the VITRAN buses a lot as well. We have the highest unemployment over there and people are reliant on VITRAN, so let's try the entire Virgin Islands."

Sen. Violet questioned the measure's viability, thinking aloud whether it would impede the DPW as it relates to flexibility in relation to hours and holiday runs. He also questioned whether the program could be implemented without legislation.

"We don't need to legislate [the VITRAN weekend service] because it's part of our intentions," James said. "The fact that it's legislated would make it mandatory and therefore will put some burden on [the Senate] in the sense that you would then be required to work with us to make it happen. [And] in the sense that we may need to come back and say we need additional funds."

James added that while the legislation mandates weekends and holidays, it also says DPW can determine its schedule, so while there may not be a day that there would be no service, "say we run two, three or tens trips, that's apparently within our purview," James said.

Prompted by a question from Sen. Nereida "Nellie" Rivera-O'Reilly, who asked whether the implementation of the weekend and holiday service would be a possibility without extra federal dollars, James said it would be best to delay the measure if the funding could not be provided.

Nonetheless, the bill was favorably voted by members of the committee, with all but one senator, Jean Forde, voting against.

The measure now heads to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, headed by Sen. Kenneth Gittens.