

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Four Months After Storms, BMV's Written And Road Tests Remain Closed, Hurting Local Businesses

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ST. CROIX -- Four months after Hurricanes Irma and Maria affected the Virgin Islands, the Bureau of Motor Vehicles (B.M.V.) has not reopened its written and road test appointments, which are mandatory for persons seeking their driver's license for the first time. The bureau's slow progress to full operation is hurting local businesses, as well as residents in need of their license.

Parents, suddenly buffeted by their children's double session school schedule, are finding it difficult to either take their children to school or pick them up. Children 16 years and older have the legal right to drive -- pending they pass the tests -- which helps ease the pressure on busy parents. And adults, whose livelihoods depend on being able to get

around, have been hampered as well, according to Carmen Clarke, owner of EZ Driving School, a business that has been in operation since 2005.

"Our business is suffering, our students and the community are suffering," Ms. Clarke told The Consortium Saturday morning in her office in Castle Coakley, while dozens of individuals -- among them students and at least two adults -- took driving classes. "Right now with double session in schools, our public transportation system is not reliable, so getting a driver's license is even more important."

She added, "I had an adult student who lost a job opportunity because they needed a driver's license. They had given the adult student 30 days, then the storm came, they gave them an extension of another 30 days, and after that they chose another person."

Ms. Clarke's decision to go to the media comes after months of attempting to quietly get B.M.V. to move quicker on restarting the written and road tests, which are essential to her business's survival. "A driver's license for a student may be considered a privilege by some, but it's a privilege given by the parent, not by B.M.V.," she said.

Ms. Clarke said she spoke with B.M.V. Director Lawrence Olive, but aside from getting assurances that the bureau was working on restarting the tests, she hasn't been updated on progress, and no reopening date was given. Ms. Clarke said she even offered her own space for the written tests, but Mr. Olive turned the offer down, fearing it would be seen as preferential treatment by Ms. Clarke's competitor.

But the lack of progress is impeding not only Ms. Clarke's operations, but that of her competitor on St. Croix, and the driving schools in St. Thomas as well.

"We can't move forward. I have students who have had appointments since September, and they haven't been able to reschedule an appointment," she said.

B.M.V. said the building used for written tests was destroyed. However, Ms. Clarke said all that's needed to facilitate the tests is a space, since the written test does not require internet connection or even a computer. "You don't even need power," she said, "all you need is a space."

As for the road tests, B.M.V. told Ms. Clarke that the area that it uses for parallel parking at its offices on St. Croix sustained damage, and the stretch of road used near Estate Paradise for further road tests lost its traffic lights. It was not clear why B.M.V. could not utilize a new, temporary location to perform the road tests.

"My thing is, as a business owner and as a taxpayer, you have these leaders who lack skills of managing the agency," a frustrated Ms. Clarke said. "Once you accept these positions, you become a public servant, so you need to listen to and consider the community as a whole."

She added, "So my thing is when? I just need to know when I'll be able to proceed. Something needs to happen."

Puerto Rico is already conducting written and road tests following Hurricane Irma, although how badly damaged the island's vehicle licensing facilities were following the storms is uncertain.

Ms. Clarke even gave ideas on how B.M.V. could not only improve its operations, but also its bottomline. Among the suggestions given, she said vehicle registration could be offered for two years, which she said would instantly double the funds collected.

"I just feel B.M.V. is lacking the leadership to really, really push that agency forward and serve the community better," she said.

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