

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill Seeking To Block Veterans From Selling Taxi Medallions Moves Forward; Trade Name Renewal Bill Faces Resistance

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A bill seeking to stop the practice that sees veterans -- who obtain the coveted taxi medallions through auctions -- from selling the medallions to anyone who is not a veteran, was favorably approved in the Committee on Government Operations, Consumers and Veterans Affairs on Monday, and forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration. The practice is well known in St. Thomas, where the taxi business is thriving, with potential buyers offering attractive prices for the medallions.

The bill, number 33-0006, was sponsored by Senator Dwayne DeGraff and was unanimously supported by lawmakers.

Veterans Affairs Director Nominee Patrick Farrell was present to testify in support of the measure. "For me, this bill is cut and dry and makes absolute sense. The ability to obtain a taxi medallion via auction is only available to Virgin Islands Veterans at this time. It is orchestrated this way to be a benefit to those Virgin Islanders who served in the United States Armed Forces," Mr. Farrell said.

A similar bill intended to clearly define a Virgin Islands veteran (Bill No. 33-0009) was also forwarded to Rules and Judiciary. The measure sought to make plain the definition of a Virgin Islands veteran. It describes this persons as someone "who entered the armed services while domiciled the Virgin Islands, or who was domiciliary of the Virgin Islands but entered the armed services in another jurisdiction while temporarily residing that jurisdiction."

But Bill No. 33-0030, which requires the annual renewal of trade names beginning Oct. 2021, while forwarded to Rules and Judiciary, could face pushback in future hearings. Not only does the bill call for yearly renewal of trade names (the current renewal window is two years), it also calls for a \$50 fee for the annual renewal, the amount currently being charged for the bi-annual renewal.

The Lieutenant Governor's Office, while in favor of an increase, disagreed with the \$50 annual charge, and requested that the responsibility of raising the fee be left up to the Office of the Lieutenant Governor.

"It has been twenty-six years since the fee was increased by legislation. The intent of the suggested change is to enable a quicker response to the changing economic conditions that can support reasonable fee increases concomitant with cost of living increases. In addition, the suggested change would retain the two-year renewal status quo to which trade name holders have grown accustomed, and who may find it cumbersome to change to an annual term," said Denise Johannes, director of the Division of Corporations and Trademarks.

Senators were generally not in favor of allowing the Lieutenant Governor's Office to set the cost for trade name renewals (the Office of the Lieutenant Governor seeks language that says, "a reasonable fee to be set by regulation"), contending that such a move would be equivalent to the Senate abandoning its duty.

The measures were forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, where amendments may be added.