

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Vialet-Sponsored Bill Mandating Credit Card Payment Option For Taxis Moves Forward

Business / **Published On May 21, 2019 09:29 AM /**

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Credit Card Machine on Taxi Cab

A bill sponsored by Senator Kurt Vialet that calls for taxi cabs in the territory to offer electronic payment options was favorably voted out of the Committee on Government Operations, Consumers and Veterans Affairs with little resistance on Monday, and will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further vetting before facing the full Senate.

Bill No. 33-0044 says, "The Commission shall establish and operate electronic monetary payment system and establish conditions and requirements of use." It also calls for the implementation of the electronic system in 120 days.

Taxi Cab Commission Executive Director Levron Sarauw said the new system could make the job of taxi drivers easier, as they'd not have to travel with so much cash.

But the real spokesman for the bill on Monday was its sponsor. Mr. Vailet said it was time for the territory to adapt to 21st Century norms to make life easier for travelers to the territory, especially with tourism being the USVI's main product. And he said allowing the taxi drivers to self-implement the credit card option had failed. One service from MasterCard, a leader in electronic payments, that gives taxi drivers in the USVI the option to accept credit cards, has been unsuccessful. It was revealed that out of the 3,000 taxi drivers in the territory, only 3 had utilized the payment system.

"And that is my point," Mr. Vailet pounced. "We have waited for the industry to do what is right, we have waited for the industry to offer flexibility for individuals visiting these islands and it has been met, time after time, with resounding failure."



Senator Kurt Violet (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

He added, "MasterCard has been here offering all of the services for free, and [MasterCard] is an international platform, and we rejected that. So the issue I want to know was why is there such a resistance? Why is there such a resistance to be able to utilize services that would allow you to expand what you're able to offer that would add to our visitors' comfort level?"

To stress his point that the technology was awash in the territory, Mr. Violet said even Carnival Village in St. Thomas and Festival Village on St. Croix had vendors offering electronic payment options using apps on cellphones.

He said the bill offers flexibility to the Taxi Cab Commission, including a minimum payment threshold, which the senator suggested should be \$10. "This is not for the dollar safaris. This is not for the pay bus as we call it on St. Croix. The commission has the ability to establish conditions and requirements for the payment system's use. So one of those conditions that the commission would set would be that safaris and pay bus operators are exempt from that. You're not going to use a credit card for a two-dollar ride," Mr. Violet said.

And the excuse used as one of the main reasons against the implementation of electronic payment options in the USVI, which is that taxi drivers are unable to operate such systems, was no longer valid, Mr. Violet contended. "We cannot continue to push it back and use the same excuse over and over that we're not ready, or our taxi drivers lack the necessary skills to do it, because they don't. They all have smart phones using for all types of stuff," the senator said.

The idea behind the measure, Mr. Violet explained, is to ascertain that the visitor experience to the USVI is without hindrance to the tourist, especially in St. Thomas whose reliance on the industry goes along with its survival. "St. Thomas is driven by tourism, we cannot be afraid to change the product that we're offering," he said. "We're offering the same old product that worked in the 70s and 80s, and then we're complaining about why we're not able to move to a next level. We cannot move to a next level because we refuse to diversify the product that we're offering."

Mr. Violet said the territory's airports and docks should mandate in contracts that taxis must accept electronic payment options. Hotels, too, he said: "You can't have a guest ready to go on an excursion and because of [the lack of payment options] they're turning back and going to their room, or they're just utilizing the beach. Transportation allows individuals to spend money."

Mr. Violet also said that a bill to mandate electronic payment options for other businesses was being drafted. They include restaurants, hair dressers, salons, and more. The senator said he separated the Taxi Cab industry out of respect for the taxi drivers, and to allow the Taxi Association to address their concerns during the Tuesday hearing.

"But they're not here," he said. "But when I was on the radio station they called me and say, 'We're going to vote you out, Violet. If you bring that bill, you gone."

"I'm bringing it," he declared.

The bill passed 3-2, with Senators Dwayne DeGraff and Athneil Thomas voting against the measure. Mr. DeGraff wanted more than 120 days for the measure's implementation. Senators voting in favor were Oakland Benta, Steven Payne, Sr., and Novelle Francis, Jr.

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