

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Setback For Violet-Sponsored Bill Seeking To Mandate Credit Card Pay Option For VI Taxi Drivers

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A bill looking to require taxi drivers in the U.S. Virgin Islands to accept a form of electronic payment was on the agenda during a Tuesday Senate session, but was eventually held in the Committee of the Whole (a rarely used option), for what Senator Marvin Blyden said would be further consideration.

Initially, Mr. Blyden, who made the motion to remove the bill from the agenda, moved to have the measure sent back to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary. However, Senator Kurt Violet, the bill's sponsor, amended the motion to have the measure remain in the Committee of the Whole until the next session. Senate President Novelle Francis had to seek the Senate's legal counsel opinion on the matter to determine whether such an

amended was allowed. Legal counsel said the Senate had no clear rules relative to Mr. Violet's amendment, and that it would be prudent to either send it back to Rules and Judiciary or keep it within the Committee of the Whole in the care of the Senate president.

There was no reason given as to why the measure was held, and there appeared to be no debate on the bill yesterday.

What is known is the staunch opposition the measure has received from the powerful Taxicab Commission in St. Thomas, whose voting bloc is believed to be so large that going against the commission's interests could spell detriment for a politician.

The measure has also received mixed reactions from Virgin Islanders, with some stating electronic payment should be an option that taxi drivers choose -- not forced -- to utilize.

"Here is the thing, I don't think this should be a law. I think business owners need to get with the program and use common sense. I think random business audits should take place more often. This should be an option, not a law. If they don't get with the program, their competition will simply run them out of business. I mean really, its 2019, why don't you accept VISA?" wrote Iffat Attiah on The Consortium's [Facebook platform](#).

Others were more supportive. "This needs to be the norm. For me the cash-only can be a bit much especially when you have to go to the ATM for cash and those fees. They need to get the Cash App or use PayPal which shows up immediately. This will also address that accountability piece and also provide data on how the economy is doing because income is tracked," wrote Rachel Lewis.

In previous hearings, Mr. Violet explained his position and the reason for the measure. [In May](#), he 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."

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."