The Virgin Islands Consortium

PSC Extends 66-Cent Ferry Fuel Surcharge for 30 Days, Weighs Increase to 75 Cents

PSC commissioners extended the 66-cent emergency ferry fuel surcharge for another 30 days while staff examine a possible increase to 75 cents, as the broader rate case remains stalled and ferry operators report ticketing delays tied to making change.

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Ferry passengers will continue paying a 66-cent emergency fuel surcharge for at least another 30 days after Public Services Commission members voted Tuesday to temporarily extend the charge while staff determine whether there is justification to raise it to 75 cents.

The existing surcharge was approaching the end of an initial 90-day period approved by the PSC in June. Ferry companies had requested another 90-day extension, arguing that the fuel-cost pressures that prompted the emergency charge have not subsided.

“The circumstances that gave rise to the new emergency fuel surcharge clearly continue,” ferry representative Maria Hodge told commissioners during Tuesday’s meeting. “it’s a matter of public understanding that what we’re occasionally allowed to call a war seems to be continuing, and the effect on our diesel prices likewise continues.”

Commissioner Laura Nichols-Samms suggested increasing the surcharge to an even $1, pointing to difficulties cashiers have experienced providing change to passengers.

“I noticed that it was a bit difficult for the cashiers to provide change for the number of people coming through, so I think it would make sense if we just…round it up to the nearest dollar,” she offered.

Commissioner Raymond Williams pushed back, arguing that any increase should be supported by a stronger justification than making transactions easier for ferry operators.

“We don’t want to be charging the customers an additional whatever just because we want to give the boat companies help with change.”

PSC Chairman David Hughes suggested that a 75-cent surcharge could make transactions easier while avoiding an increase to $1. He also proposed requiring ferry companies to maintain sufficient coins to provide change to passengers.

Mr. Hughes asked the ferry operators to provide the Commission with information on the total monthly revenue generated by the existing surcharge, following a request from Mr. Williams. While awaiting that information, Mr. Williams indicated that he would support a short-term extension of the current 66-cent charge until commissioners can determine whether an increase is warranted.

Mr. Hughes said the difficulty of making change is already affecting ferry operations.

“This is actually creating delays in the schedule of the ferries because they’re not able to process enough people through the ticketing process to get the boats loaded on time,” he said.

However, the chairman noted that the emergency surcharge was intended as a temporary measure while the PSC worked toward establishing a new permanent ferry rate.

“I thought that by now we would have gotten to an actual new rate in our rate case, which we have not achieved,” he said. “I’ll get as comfortable as I can get with this fuel charge surcharge by simply extending it 30 days and giving us a chance to look at it more closely.”

According to Mr. Hughes, the broader rate investigation has stalled because PSC staff have not yet responded to objections raised by the ferry companies regarding rate examiner Jed JohnHope’s final report. Without that work completed, he said, commissioners are not yet equipped to take up the permanent rate matter.

Taking those factors into consideration, commissioners present Tuesday unanimously approved a 30-day extension of the existing 66-cent emergency fuel surcharge. During that period, PSC staff will examine the ferry companies' financial information and determine whether there is sufficient justification to increase the surcharge by nine cents, to 75 cents.