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Taxi Cab Commission Slammed as 'Rogue' As Board is Said to Exploit Gov't By Hosting Multiple Meetings Per Day and Gets Paid Each Time

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Senator Kurt Vialet, Chairman of the Committee on Finance, on Wednesday requested a list of stipends paid to members of the Taxicab Commission Board after it was revealed by Shane Benjamin, Taxicab Commission executive director, that board members were receiving stipends, estimated to be between \$75-\$125, each time a meeting is held — including multiple times a day — something the board is said to do often.

Most government boards meet once a month, but the TaxiCab Commission Board meets roughly eight times a month, according to Senator Janelle Sarauw.

Ms. Sarauw engaged the Taxicab Commission Wednesday during a budget hearing and chided the board for its behavior. She said board members, currently eight with one vacant seat, get the stipend if they meet to set an agenda, then meet again to hold a meeting, then hold a third meeting to debrief — all in week day — and even when they get on the phone to talk. All of this is legal, the senator said, but she added that it was an abuse of the law and exploitation of government finances.

The Taxicab Commission sought a 2022 budget from the government of \$667,361.

Mr. Benjamin, the Taxicab Commission executive director, was being questioned by Ms. Sarauw about the frequency of board meetings and asked, “Are board members being paid two times in a day for meeting?”

He said “yes.” Ms. Sarauw then stated, “I just want to put on record that the board is milking taking stipends from the government of the Virgin Islands in excess.”

She then asked whether the board had implemented any new policies since Mr. Benjamin became executive director, a position he has held for roughly two years. He said the board had implemented no new policies; it only amended parts of a previously drafted "automobile for hire" policy.

The board also fired two employees Mr. Benjamin hired, contending that he did not consult with them first. Senators, pointing to the board's behavior, then questioned whether Mr. Benjamin even had a role at the commission as executive director.

“Mr. Chair, I don’t have any more questions because the Taxicab Commission Board has gone rogue,” Ms. Sarauw said. “... They are putting stipends for two times day, five-six times a week, not one policy the board has implemented.”

Mr. Violet sought to learn who writes the stipend checks for board members. Mr. Benjamin said the Department of Finance.

"The Finance commissioner will be coming come before us shortly; I’m just putting it out there publicly. We need to make sure that if you are serving on a board you cannot get two stipends for the same day. Nor is it the expectation of this body that any of the particular boards are going to be meeting five days a week... that’s like making a separate salary off the board," Mr. Violet said.

He then warned the board that this behavior could affect the Taxicab Commission's budget. “We got to be careful because what we would end up doing is creating a line item for the board and reduce the amount of funds that can be utilized," the Finance Committee chairman said. Mr. Violet then requested a list of all stipends that have been paid for this fiscal year.

Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory, speaking to Mr. Benjamin, said, “The responsibility of any board is to do the oversight. You are the executive director... You should be responsible for the day-to-day operations which is inclusive of hiring employees. Mr. Benjamin told Ms. Frett-Gregory that he hasn’t hired anyone since the two employees were fired.

“So basically you are saying you don’t have authorization to bring on additional employees?” Ms. Frett-Gregory asked. Mr. Benjamin responded, “In a nutshell, yes”

Ms Frett-Gregory then stated, “We are going to have to call the board in to answer questions because this is not good." She noted the increase in tourism the territory has been experiencing

and added, “We have to be regulating our taxi business here in the territory. If you don't have those positions then this is the wild, wild west.”

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