

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Lawmakers Support Bill Creating 'Complete Street Policy' and Accompanying Taskforce

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Senators in the Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunication on Wednesday gave their approval for a Complete Street Policy and a Complete Street Task Force to be created within the Department of Public Works with funding for task force operations identified by Governor Albert Bryan.

Bill No. 34-0087 "was already voted by all of the members of the 33rd Legislature, but the governor vetoed the bill because we did not identify funding for the task force. However, the governor has graciously agreed to provide the funding source for the task force because he agrees that the Complete Streets Act bill is a win-win for the entire community," said Senator Steven Payne who sponsored the bill and provided the

explanatory summary about the impact of its intention to the committee.

Mr. Payne explained that the main objective of the legislation is “to aid in the development and implementation of strategies to increase the usability of all streets for all modes of travel for citizens of all ages and abilities in the Virgin Islands.”

He said that currently, the roads and streets across the entire territory are in serious disrepair and not in a position to serve the need of all of its residences for all modes of travel. “The roads in the Virgin Islands suffered severe damage as a result of the 2017 hurricane season and the massive influx of heavy equipment trucks... during the ongoing recovery process,” he said in his explanatory statement.

Referring to a 2016 Department of Health survey which identified the need to revamp streets and roadways, Mr. Payne said as part of the recovery process following the disastrous 2017 hurricane season, the Virgin Islands has a unique opportunity to make good of recovery dollars to repair, upgrade, and enhance its streets and roadways.

“The result of the Virgin Islands Department of Health 2016 API survey confirmed the need to revamp our streets and roadways. Its findings demonstrate that in the territory 87 percent of our street length has no sidewalks, 47 percent of our street length has no lighting, 79 percent of streets has no walkable destination such as shops, restaurants, or parks and only 53 percent has a mixed use of residential and commercial properties. A mere 4.8 percent have public transport transit stops,” he shared.

Claiming that over the past years the Virgin Islands has historically spent a disproportionate amount of transportation funds to accommodate streets designed only for vehicular traffic, the senator told the committee that “this practice has seriously disenfranchised a significant number of residents, especially the most vulnerable who cannot afford vehicles or are physically unable or choose not to drive and must rely on a combination of walking and public transportation.”

“This piece of legislation seeks to consider the needs of diverse modes of transport including but not limited to walking, biking, driving, wheeling, rolling, riding, public transit, car-sharing, para-transit, taxis, freight carriers, and emergency response vehicles,” he said while pointing out some of the benefits of creating the task force.

“Implementing a Complete Street Act task force will ensure a safe, convenient, and context-sensitive transportation system for all modes and for users of all ages and abilities,” Mr. Payne told the committee. “The task force will be comprised of ten members: four members from St. Thomas, four members from St. Croix, and two members from St John – all appointed by the governor for a term of six years.”

The governor, according to the legislation is tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that the most knowledgeable and experienced personnel are appointed and must consult with the commissioners of the Departments of Public Works, Property and Procurement, Planning and Natural Resources, Human Services, Health, Sports, Parks and Recreation, the Housing Finance Authority and the Disability Rights Center.

DPW Commissioner Derek Gabriel, who was one of the testifiers at the hearing, said his department supports the spirit and intent of the law but there are some concerns.

“We support the spirit and intent of this legislation because it is one that provides aspirational models for our highways, streets, corridors, and thoroughfares. The Department of Public Works in conjunction with our fellow highway partners are already making strives within the department to bring several segments of this bill to fruition. However, there are a few sections that are concerning,” he said.

Among the areas of concern expressed was the number of people that should be on the task force and the directive to provide an annual report which will require additional staff at the department.

Having received approval from the Committee of Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications, the bill will now be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for amendments and finalization, before heading to the full body for a final vote.