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Threat of Taxi Strike and Unpreparedness Loom Over Upcoming Tourist Season; Miscommunication Delays Planned Fare Increase

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Safari Taxi in St. Thomas. By. GETTY IMAGES

The fall in revenue as a result of Covid-19 restrictions, coupled with increasing fuel prices have left taxi operators mulling strike action. Without a concrete decision from the Taxicab Commission on fare increase, both operators and motorists have sought to implement their own pricing.

Marilyn Joyce Charles, the interim president of the Sunshine Taxi and Tours shared on Tuesday during a Committee on Economic Development & Agriculture hearing that the fare for private road drivers has not changed for 17 years despite requests for increases.

Ms. Charles said the price was supposed to increase from \$2.50 to \$3.50 during the day and \$4.00 after 6:00 p.m. because of the increase in fuel prices. A special rate of \$3.00 was also to be applied for elderly motorists and students.

“But we never heard from them, so the passengers now are telling the drivers because of the raise of prices, they tell them take the \$0.50,” Ms. Charles said, explaining that there are drivers who on their own have raised the price in the absence of a decision by the Commission.

“They are operating at a loss; I advised them to strike because the passengers, they quarreling with them,” she remarked.

A delicate balance has to be struck for taxi operators – a decision between remaining operational or pricing themselves out of the market.

Meanwhile, Secretary of the Virgin Islands Taxicab Commission, Myrna George, said one of the setbacks is that taxi operators have not yet finalized recommendations for the new fares.

“We are asking them to finalize it as quickly as possible as we are continuously getting changes. Persons are not too comfortable with the rate increase that was proposed,” she said.

She added, “Many of them have concerns that they do not want to price themselves out of the market. They are afraid that other entities may come in but our target date is June 30th and if we do not get that done, we as the Commission is prepared to have a dialogue with the drivers and the community about a fuel surcharge.”

The tourist season for the territory, particularly in St Croix may turn the fates of taxi operators around, with cruise line visitors projected to triple in St. Croix, however there are concerns about the territory’s preparedness to receive these visitors.

Assistant Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Taxicab Commission, Vernice M. Gumbs, said it has been struggling to recover since Covid-19 restrictions were introduced.

“It has become increasingly difficult for VITCC to provide the necessary services and generate revenues which has led to the agency’s expenses surpassing its cash-flow and creating a burdensome workload on the limited remaining staff,” she said. “Unfortunately, the Commission’s current budget does not allow us to hire additional personnel.”

“The rise in gas prices is affecting all aspects of the vehicle-for-hire industry to include but not limited to maintenance of the operator’s vehicles, and how much money they take home at the end of the week,” Ms. Gumbs added. “Gas prices are cutting into the profits that operators can make; our operators are feeling the pinch, and eventually will have no choice but to pass along higher costs to the consumers, which opens the door for discussion, “should vehicle for hire operators bite the bullet and absorb the extra cost or do we raise the prices?”

Making very frank remarks, Senator Janelle Sarauw said, “There is absolutely no stability with the Taxi Cab Commission,” as she called for the Commission’s board to be disbanded.

“The Commission is in shambles because the board has usurped the power of the executive director. The issue with the Taxi Cab Commission is the board. The board should be disbanded,”

Ms. Sarauw remarked, adding that, “We are going through Executive Director after Executive Director after Executive Director. There is absolutely no stability at the Taxi Cab Commission.”

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