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Taxicab Commission Could Face Inspector General Audit After Disastrous Hearing Where Majority of Proceeds Could Not Be Accounted For

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Loretta Lloyd, Taxicab Commission chairperson. By. SCREENSHOT/V.I. LEGISLATURE

Senator Kurt Vialet, chairman on the Committee on Finance has called for a meeting to be convened in the Senate Committee on Gov't Operations and Consumer Affairs to dig deeper into the V.I. Taxicab Commission (VITC), after its executives proved numerous times on Friday that they could not account for a majority of the commission's operating proceeds.

The commission will also have to do without \$305,000 which should have been appropriated to it for the 2022 budget, but which the chairperson said she only received notice for on Thursday evening by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

“Those monies are not going to be included in the budget and I’m going to ask the Committee on Jurisdiction to immediately convene a meeting and you are going to be asked to come back to the Finance Committee, not with this testimony but to give us numbers.”

Loretta Lloyd, Taxicab Commission chairperson, claimed that she had been unaware of the appropriation prior to Thursday evening and that employees were being paid from contributions collected by the commission from the Department of Finance.

It was all downhill for the commission, after it admitted that it had passed off its 2022 budget as its fiscal year 2023 budget because according to Ms. Lloyd, they did not know the correct revenue and expenditure numbers to create a new budget for 2023.

“We don’t have the right figures, we don’t have the right numbers, we don’t have the revenues, we don’t have the expenditures. We don’t have those so we are asking your indulgence that we can come back and present it,” she told lawmakers.

Vernice Gumbs, the acting executive director of the Taxicab Commission added that none of the revenue recorded in the budget reflected the true collections.

“None of it is true because what they prepared and what is recorded is not consistent as it has not been recorded into the ERP system on a monthly basis,” she said when senator Janelle Sarauw asked for the true figures.

After hearing that the commission could neither account for the number of taxi operators under its jurisdiction, or present the Senate with the correct number of taxi licenses or medallions auctioned for taxi drivers, Mr. Vialet dismissed the commission’s representatives until such a time that they could provide the Legislature with accurate figures into the entity’s operations.

The commission was also unable to account for the amount of money paid in fees by taxi operators so far for the year, as Ms. Lloyd claimed that information regarding fee collection was not being put into the system regularly.

This fiscal year ends in September and as of March 31, 2022, only \$57,000 had been deposited into the taxicab collection fund which is more than four times less collections for previous years. The Taxicab Commission Fund currently has a negative balance of just over \$200,000 which neither Ms. Lloyd or Ms. Gumbs said they were aware of.

“I asked for the balance in the Taxicab Commission Fund, it is negative - \$216,970 because monies aren’t being deposited. It’s not there [in the budget book], I requested it from Finance and OMB,” Mr. Vialet told his colleagues.

During the budget hearing, he leaned favorably towards requesting that the Inspector General conduct a probe of the Taxi Cab Commission, a move that Ms. Lloyd said she welcomed.

“We would welcome that as well. There is something wrong going on if you collecting monies every day, you have to deposit them but they have to be deposited in the right account,” she said, as Mr. Vialet moved on to the next senator in disbelief.

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory additionally called for an audit of the Taxi License Fund and demanded that the commission show that it is capable of collecting the million dollars that it is asking the government to appropriate for 2023, describing the commission’s operations as a case of "serious mismanagement" and "bad business."

“We have to have an audit of this because I don’t know if we realize what’s happening but there’s a whole cloud of frustration because we’re having a circular conversation around the Taxicab Commission,” she remarked.

Ms. Gumbs, who is the fourth person to act in the role of VITC’s executive director in a span of three years, only has four months on the job. She told legislators that she had no direct staff.

The board is asking the government to fund two more enforcement officers since the chairman terminated those services because according to Ms. Gumbs, the former executive director Linda Smith, did not have the authority to hire these employees without her approval, referring to them as “illegal” hires.

Ms. Lloyd, the VITC chairperson, said the board had given these employees the option, by letter, to resign but they refused and were ultimately terminated.

Senator Janelle Sarauw however made the point that under the chairman’s definition of an illegal hire, the employment of the present director, having been hired without a Notice of Personnel Action (NOPA) — documents that verify someone’s status as a government employee — or a Payroll Request Form (PRF) would also be considered illegal.

“You just released two officers last year saying that they were illegally hired because you didn’t have any say in it, and this is a matter of power and authority and your ego at this point,” she said.

In addition to requests made by Senators Frett-Gregory and Violet, Senator Javan James also requested that the commission forward the minutes of their meetings and the agenda for the past six months to the Finance Committee to understand the current situation of the commission.