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Bill to Increase Compensation for Senate Staff Sent Back for Review; Measure Seeking Taxi Tarif Hike and Feasibility Study on Ride-Sharing Apps Held

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Elesha George **August 19, 2022**

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Ride-sharing companies Lyft and Uber pickup spot at the airport. By. GETTY IMAGES

An amendment that would allow legislative staff to earn more income from overtime and night work and to earn lump-sum payments for annual leave, has been held by the Committee on Finance for further amendment, after six senators voted unanimously on Thursday to have the executive director's office of the Legislature craft a policy that would better address fair compensation for central staff.

Committee chair, Senator Kurt Vialet said the new bill would include policies developed by the executive director which would address the concerns of those different areas.

“I think this body needs to give the executive director office an opportunity to address the areas that were involved in this bill with the exception of anything in reference to senator or senatorial staff because that is going to be totally out,” he said.

The draft bill, which was circulated in the Senate Wednesday, applied to all employees, officers and elected officials of the Legislature. But all senators, including the sponsor of the bill — Senator Genevieve Whitaker — agreed to remove elected officials as beneficiaries. In fact, Ms. Whitaker said an amended version of the bill did not include compensation to lawmakers.

“This has nothing to do with senators. This has to do with the central staff of the Legislature,” she assured.

The bill is an attempt to bring Title 2, Chapter 3, Section 41 of the Virgin Islands code in compliance with federal law regarding overtime, annual pay and night deferential pay.

According to the proposed Bill No. 34-0251, security guards and transportation personnel who work between the hours of 6:00 p.m and 6:00 a.m. would qualify to receive an additional 10 percent of their basic rate of pay. Currently, the 1967 law makes no allowances for night deferential pay nor does it permit staff in the Legislature to be compensated for hours of overtime worked. Employees instead are paid time off to balance out hours they worked beyond their regular 40-hour work week.

Upon retirement, resignation or termination, the bill also proposes that every employee should be entitled to compensation in lump-sum for all accumulated unused and current accrued annual leave to which they are entitled.

While passing such a law would ensure that these payments cannot be reversed through the change of Legislature presidents, Kurell A. Sheridan, executive director of the Legislature said she also has the authority, through policy change, to make those adjustments for all central staff.

She said they are already in the process of drafting these policies with the exception of night deferential pay. “If it is the desire of the body for a night deferential policy to be implemented, one will be drafted.”

Michael Benjamin, the Legislature's acting director of business and financial management, said the amendment, as currently proposed, would have increased the Senate’s operating budget by \$2 million annually. With the inclusion of annual leave for senators, the budget would have increased from \$21 million to \$23 million, with \$325,000 of the \$2 million coming from payment of senators.

Based on rough estimates, Mr. Benjamin projects that annual overtime pay would amount to an additional \$50,000 and \$38,000 annually for night differential pay for security guards and enforcement officers. His projections are based on current compensatory pay for 2022.

Currently, security guards accumulate \$16,000 in compensation time for working on holidays.

Another bill proposed by Ms. Whitaker to change the tariff of taxis was also held in committee by the chair. Lawmakers chose not to amend a tariff that would require annual publication of maximum rates for taxi service, authorize a \$1 surcharge for increases in gasoline or other fuels; and direct the Taxicab Commission to conduct a feasibility and impact study on ride sharing businesses.

Mr. Violet explained that the bill may no longer be necessary in its current state since the Taxicab Commission planned to implement a 50 percent increase in tariff by the end of August.

“The good senator that offered the bill, offered it as a result of no increases in tariff and a way to offset the cost for taxi drivers and the high cost of fuel. However, since the bill was drafted we have learnt that there will be an increase in tariff of some 50 percent that the Taxicab Commission should be implementing by the end of August, and this body did not necessarily want to increase a next fee on top of the increase in tariff,” he explained.

The pending [tariff increase](#) will be the first in 17 years for taxi drivers in the U.S Virgin Islands.

Meanwhile, a third bill to increase the time period for the renewal of firearm licenses, to provide for a discount of the renewal fee for senior citizens, and to define the term senior citizen was also held in committee for further review.

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