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Senators Lash VI Taxicab Commission Again as Bill to Refine Duties of Executive Director Moves Forward

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Taxis at the Cyril E. King Airport on April 30, 2023 at 1:39 p.m. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

In an intense meeting on Wednesday, the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection, chaired by Senator Carla Joseph, held a hearing focused on clarifying the role of the V.I. Taxicab Commission's executive director. The hearing highlighted ongoing operational issues, particularly related to the commission's board.

Vernice Gumbs, the executive director of the commission, faced questions during the committee meeting but her soft-spoken responses were deemed insufficient by Senator Joseph. Her health conditions, which have been ongoing since February, seemed to impact her ability to articulate her

answers.

Gumbs' written testimony was read into the record at the start of the hearing. She expressed that a lack of involvement and poor job performance by employees had created challenges for her. She particularly singled out the poor performance of employees in the St. Thomas office. She claimed that these issues had caused an inefficient approvals process and revealed that the Commission was undergoing an audit from the Office of the Inspector General.

“Employees in the St. Croix office have consistently worked to ensure daily revenues are inputted into the GVI ERP system, maintained an updated medallion registry database, provided monthly reports, responded to complaints timely and issued citations etc,” she said. In contrast, “the employees in the St. Thomas office, which also services in St. John, have failed to maintain an accurate updated medallion registry database, ensure daily revenues were entered into the GVI ERP system and provide monthly reports. [They do not] respond to complaints timely, if all and issue citations.”

Further updates came from Loretta Lloyd, the chair of the board. She revealed ongoing problems such as the commission's outdated rules and regulations that were still pending vetting and formulation by the Attorney General's office, and the Office of the Governor's legal counsel. Lloyd also mentioned the absence of bylaws, which were only recently drafted and ratified in March of this year.

Lloyd disclosed that another significant problem was the commission's ineffective board, which is currently understaffed and outdated. She informed senators that she had communicated with the governor about the urgency of filling these vacancies.

Due to Gumbs' health condition, most questions were directed to Lloyd, who struggled to answer several of the operational questions posed to her. Senator Marvin Blyden's questioning about the date of the last board meeting led to an exasperation-filled response, with the senator expressing dissatisfaction over the lack of solutions and apparent abundance of excuses.

“Based on these two testimonies, and the one before and the one before I have not seen any substantive information in terms of solutions, recommendations... I only see excuses, excuses, excuses, excuses,” Blyden said.

A heated exchange occurred when Senator Kenneth Gittens chastised his colleagues for their surprise at the commission's state, which he had previously described as a disaster. Gittens encouraged the legislative body to address reform of the Taxicab Commission holistically. Committee chair Sen. Carla Joseph retorted, stating she had given the commission the benefit of the doubt despite its challenges.

Joseph further questioned Lloyd about the absence of an assistant to the executive director and why requests for minutes from Taxicab Commission board meetings had remained unfulfilled. She described this as a "major crisis."

The latter part of the meeting moved to a debate on legislation introduced by Senator Angel Bolques Jr. to refine the duties of the Taxicab Commission's executive director. Former Senator Janelle Sarauw testified in support of the new bill, stating it was vital for the Executive Director to manage the commission effectively given its importance to the local economy.

"The state of the Commission was in shambles," the former senator said. She argued that the board was using "outdated language in the code to usurp the powers of the director, thus rendering

them ineffective.” Because of this, “the previous two directors and this one operated in a symbolic, figurative fashion.” In her testimony, Sarauw directly contradicted something Lloyd had asserted in the previous block. Responding to a direct question from Sen. Gittens, the board chair had affirmed that she was not residing outside of the territory, but according to Sarauw, Lloyd “has not lived on island for about the last four to five years.”

The bill received unanimous support from the six members present and will now proceed to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further vetting and consideration.

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