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Lawmakers Ready to Crack Down on Abandoned Cars As DPW Expresses Need For More VITRAN, Street Cleaning Funding

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Amid pressing issues of street maintenance and public accessibility, the V.I. Department of Public Works presented its 2024 budgetary needs to the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance this Monday. Central to the discussion were the rampant abandoned vehicles littering the territory, with lawmakers keen on imposing stricter penalties and enhancing enforcement.

DPW Commissioner Derek Gabriel meticulously outlined the financial needs, sharing that 44 percent of the requested \$26 million from the territory's general fund would be set aside for employee compensation. Other allocations included 40 percent for "other services and charges," 7.7 percent for capital expenditure, 4.5 percent for supplies, and 3.4 percent for utilities.

"I am proud of the work our department has achieved, especially in fostering strong inter-agency collaborations," said Mr. Gabriel, emphasizing their achievements in replacing outdated water networks and enhancing the electrical grid.

However, Senator Frett-Gregory expressed concern over certain financial asks, questioning the requested \$16 million for the Western Cemetery wall in Charlotte Amalie. "We had approved funds for this in a previous Legislature," she noted. Mr. Gabriel responded by pointing out that while the Senate had greenlit the funds, they were never released by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Frett-Gregory emphasized the need for a comprehensive view of government expenses to make informed decisions on funding transfers.

The lingering issue of abandoned vehicles dominated much of the session. "We're allocating at least \$150,000 territory-wide for removing these vehicles. Yet the fines we've collected? A mere \$35,000," Ms. Frett-Gregory remarked, proposing an increase in the current \$1,000 fine and even making the act a criminal offense. "Our focus should be on essential services, not cleaning up after irresponsible car owners."

Senator Kenneth Gittens suggested the creation of a government impound lot to boost revenue, reduce dependency on private contractors, and address the vehicle issue. Additionally, Senator Carla Joseph urged DPW to review the allocation distribution, advocating for individual allotments for St. Thomas and St. John.

Mr. Gabriel also shed light on other operational challenges. "We need more roadside contractors, particularly on St. Croix," he said, citing the necessity for increased program funds. Street cleaning, especially in areas like Market Square, came under the spotlight. Assistant Commissioner for St. Croix, Avril George, mentioned a manpower crunch due to the recent end of a worker program, but added that some workers from that program had transitioned to full-time roles.

As discussions pivoted to other concerns like the increasing number of chickens in urban areas, Mr. Gabriel suggested stronger trash management and floated the idea of a community-based initiative to trap and farm these birds.

Accessibility remained a paramount topic. Senator Ray Fonseca voiced concerns about walkability for school children, and Mr. Gabriel assured the committee of ongoing evaluations to ensure project accessibility.

DPW's future revenue strategies included a new advertising program for buses and shelters, with Gabriel optimistic about its potential. Assistant Commissioner for Transportation, Carol Ovesen-McGregor, however, highlighted unmet needs like Sunday transportation services for the disabled due to funding shortfalls.

Inter-island connectivity also surfaced, with lawmakers discussing possible subsidies for the ferry service between St. Croix and St. Thomas.