



Legislature Of The Virgin Islands

CAPITOL BUILDING, P.O. 1690 ST. THOMAS, U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS 00804

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THE HONORABLE
Carla J. Joseph

LEGISLATIVE SECRETARY

35TH LEGISLATURE OF
THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

Press Release

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CHAIR

Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs,
and Consumer Protection

*Liaison to the United States Department of Interior and
Office of Insular Affairs*

MEMBER

Committee of the Whole

Committee on Rules and Judiciary

Committee on Education and Workforce Development

Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning

Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, VETERANS AFFAIRS, AND CONSUMER PROTECTION GRILLED TAXI CAB COMMISSION, AND VETTED BILLS FOCUSED ON THE TAXICAB COMMISSION, VETERANS AFFAIRS, ADOPTING GOVERNOR'S DAY AND HONORING LOCAL HERO BENBURIN STEPHENS

ST. THOMAS, USVI - The Senate Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection, chaired by Senator Carla Joseph, met on Wednesday, May 31, 2023, in the Earl B. Legislative Hall on St. Thomas to receive testimony from the Virgin Islands Taxicab Commission and to consider legislation focused on the responsibilities of the Executive Director of the Taxicab Commission, to establish a Veterans Council, to honor local hero Mr. Benburin "Benny" Stephens posthumously and to designate the third Monday in February as Virgin Islands Governors' Day.

In Block I, the Committee received testimony from the Virgin Islands Taxicab Commission on its current operations and challenges. Testifiers Board Chairwoman Ms. Loretta Lloyd and Executive Director Ms. Vernice Gumbs were grilled on operations of the Commission and closure of St. Thomas/St. John Office due to mold remediation. The closure of the St. Thomas/St. John's Office, from March 21, 2023, to the present, has provided limited services. Questioning in the Committee by senators reveals that several issues affect the operations of the Commission. Issues that have resulted in the limitation of operation and services include:

1. Current closure of the Office,
2. Manual functions of the office, which lacks online digital services for in-house and industry operations,
3. Lack of adequate staffing,
4. Outdated rules and regulations,
5. Expired board member terms, and
6. the lack of a quorum for most Commission Board meetings.

In her testimony, Taxicab Commission Executive Director Vernice Gumbs decried insubordination and lack of performance of the Commission's staff in St. Thomas/St. John District Office. The lack of automated services and data has also disadvantaged the Commission.

During questioning, Executive Director Gumbs and Commission Chairwoman Lloyd could not provide data because of the lack of a database and manual operations.



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Senator Joseph said, "This legislative body has done its best to provide as much support to the commission with budgetary resources and stand ready to address any shortfalls to make the Commission whole in performing more efficiently"

Joseph said, "the Commission's budget was increased in the 34th Legislature. I like to give people the benefit of the doubt and work to bring resolutions to vexing matters at hand."

Joseph added, "We are at a crossroads and can no longer tolerate the inefficiencies of the Commission's operations, which have overarching impacts on the gateway to our number one revenue-generating industry – Tourism."

Immediately following the Taxicab Commission's Testimony, the Committee vetted Bill No. 35-0036 – An Act amending Title 3 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 16, section 274, subsection (f), paragraph (11) to clarify the duties and responsibilities of the Executive Director of the Taxicab Commission. Testifiers include the Taxicab Commission.

The Bill was previously introduced in the 34th Legislature by former Senator Janelle Sarauw, who also testified to support the measure. Senators concurred that the Bill would provide the needed structure to move the Commission forward.

Others in support of the Bill include Taxicab Commission Chairwoman Loretta Lloyd, who stated that the measure would prevent future boards from misinterpreting the duties of the board and its responsibility.

The Bill, sponsored by Senators Angel L. Bolques, Jr. and Kenneth L. Gittens, was unanimously approved and moved to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

Commissioner Richard T. Evangelista, Esq., of the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs also testified on the Bill.

In Block III, the Committee considered Bill No. 35-0008 – An Act amending Title 3 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 1, section 8a relating to the Office of Veterans Affairs to establish the Veterans Council under the Office of Veterans Affairs to serve as an advisor to the Office of Veterans Affairs and as a liaison between the Office of Veterans Affairs and all private entities serving veterans in the Territory.

All invited testifiers did not favor the Bill. Testifiers stated the Bill would add an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy. Testifiers included Mr. Patrick Farrell, Director of the Office of Veterans Affairs, Ms. Hillis Benjamin, Commander American Legion, Post 90, Major General Kodjo S. Knox-Limbacker, Adjutant General V.I. National Guard and Jean Forde, Assistant Commissioner of the Department of Labor.

Under Director Farrell's leadership, the Office of Veterans Affairs has just instituted a Veterans Council that is early in its stages and is in the process of establishing the bylaws.

Codifying the Council was an area of robust discussion as senators and testifiers went back and forth regarding the necessity and bureaucracy.



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The Bill sponsored by Senator Dwayne DeGraff failed with two voting yeas, four voting nays, and one not voting.

Senator Joseph said, "We need to see how the Council works. We need to give it time to work out its kinks. I like the idea and its value to the Office of Veterans Affairs."

Joseph added that the advisory Council needs to be advisory and voluntary as it is now.

In Block IV, the Committee will receive testimony concerning Bill No. 35-0033 - An Act honoring and commending Mr. Benburin "Benny" Stephens posthumously for his heroism in saving the lives of a mother and her children and renaming the Bovoni Road (Route No. 30), specifically from the entrance of the Abattoir to the entrance of the Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School, "The Benburin" Benny" Stephens Drive."

Testifiers Mrs. Beverly Stephens-Samuel, Ms. Monife G. Stout, Mr. Ariel Brathwaite, and Dr. Robert Chalwell, spoke on the life, legacy, and heroism of Mr. Benburin "Benny" Stephens, a native of Tortola BVI who raised his family in Savan and later in the Bovoni/Nadir area of St. Thomas.

Senator Joseph, who grew up in the Bovoni area, said, "Mr. Stephens placed himself in the way of harm to rescue another family who could have easily been consumed by fire. He acted as his brother's keeper, a hero, and a man willing to go the extra mile to help a young family headed by a female household that needed help. That is to be commended."

The Bill, sponsored by Senators Ray Fonseca, Marvin A. Blyden, Angel Bolques, and Carla Joseph, was unanimously approved and moved to the Rules Committee.

In the final Block of the day, the Committee received testimony on Bill No. 35-0075 - An Act to designate the third Monday in February as Virgin Islands Governors Day. Invited testifiers include Former Senator Shawn M. Malone, Former Senator Myron Jackson, Former Lt. Governor Vargrave Richards, and Former Senator Stedman Hodge, the current State Chair of the Democratic Party of the V.I.

Testifiers spoke to the importance of instituting Governor's Day in the Territory, where citizens still do not have the right to vote for the President of the United States and where the Delegate to Congress can only vote in Committee and not on the Floor of Congress. The bill as it stand would not replace President's Day but with share the same day as the federal holiday.

Former Senators Jackson said why not at a time when we see the evolution of naming our educational institutions and streets in honor of civil servants? Former Senator Malone recommended that the Bill be amended to include the development of publications by the University of the Virgin Islands on each Chief Executive of the Territory to be placed in schools and public libraries.

In addition, Malone said curriculum should be developed and implemented in schools to create self-awareness and promote VI pride in present and future Virgin Islanders.



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This Bill, sponsored by Senators Angel L. Bolques, Jr., and Marvin A. Blyden, was approved and forwarded to the Committee on Rules for further consideration with three yeas, one nay, and three absent.

Committee members present at Wednesday's meeting include Chair: Senator Carla J. Joseph, Members: Senator Javan E. James, Sr., Vice-Chair, Senators Samuel Carrion, Ray Fonseca, Alma Francis Heyliger, Kenneth L. Gittens, and Milton E. Potter. Non-Committee Members present were Senators Angel Bolques Jr., Marvin Blyden, Diane Capehart, Dwayne DeGraff, and Marise James.

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