




Committee on Government Operations, Veteran Affairs and Consumer Protection

TESTIMONY: 35-0036

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Good morning Government Operations, Veteran Affairs and Consumer Protection Committee Chairwoman, Senator Carla Joseph, Vice Chair, Senator Javan James Sr., committee members, non-committee members present, and everyone listening and viewing today.

I am testifying today in support of bill number 35-0036, which clarifies the duties and responsibilities of the Executive Director of the Taxicab Commission. Commendations to Senator Bolques for resubmitting legislation and seeing it through.

On May 13, 2022, I drafted legislation that would empower the Executive Director of the Taxicab Commission. The legislation tasked the Director with “overseeing the day-to-day activities, hiring of staff, improving performance, developing organizational culture, managing staff, reporting on revenue, and directing the organizational strategy.” The legislation was unanimously approved by this body politic in the last session of the 34th Legislature but vetoed by the governor with new suggested language that basically says the same thing. That suggested language by the Office of the Governor outlined in bill 35-0036 is not as specific as the previous bill, but it generalizes the role of the Executive Director – who would be responsible for the administrative management duties and responsibilities of the Commission.

While serving in the 33rd and 34th Legislature, it was apparent after many committee hearings that the state of the Commission was in shambles. During the Taxicab’s budget hearing in 2021, it was evident that the board and the executive directors clashed. What I noted was the board’s utilization of outdated language in the code to usurp the powers of the Director, thus rendering them ineffective. Because of such action by the board, the previous two directors and this one operated in a symbolic, figurative fashion. The board of Taxicab Commission chaired by Ms. Lloyd who has not lived on island for about the last four to five years continued to render decisions that literally left the finances of the Commission in distress, understaffed which lead to many office closures and the chief of enforcement was selected based on favoritism and not qualifications.

The following are just a few examples why the Executive Director must be empowered.

- 1) Former Executive Director Mr. Shane Benjamin, interviewed two enforcement officers, they were screened by POST, and then sent letters indicating the date they should report to the academy. After those two recruits resigned from their previous places of employment to join the academy, the Board sent letters to both relieving them. First, the position is one of the lowest paid in this government, \$27,040, secondly, according to Ms. Lloyd, the reason those new recruits were fired was because Mr. Benjamin was out of place for hiring them and instead the board should have done such. The board refused to reconsider their decision leaving the recruits in a state of perplexity. To this day, the enforcement division of the commission is operating without an adequate amount of enforcement officers.
- 2) Former Director Linda Smith testified before this body, stating that she reprimanded an enforcement officer for job abandonment, not being truthful regarding his credentials, forging time, and a slew of other infractions. Instead of the board allowing Ms. Smith to manage the staff, the board without informing Ms. Smith overturned her decision. In September/October that officer was home for months following a decision from POST.

According to VI law, he was deemed unqualified because he did not complete the police academy.

- 3) Both former director Ms. Linda Smith and Ms. Vernice Gumbs, came before the Committee on Finance to present the budget, but was unable to. The budget presentation was an utter disaster, and it was discovered that the board authorized the Dept of Finance to remove Taxicab Commission staff from the ERP system. As a result, the directors of the Commission were unable to provide accurate revenue reports, nor were they able to establish a budget because the board refused to provide the directors with the information. Former Finance Chairman Sen. Violet had to adjourn and reschedule the Commission. On the rescheduled date, the Directors showed up with no information because the board still refused to share the requisite financial information.

The aforementioned are just a few examples where the board simply refused to empower the Executive Directors. To this date, the board has not produced the minutes for roughly two to three years despite numerous Senate requests, yet they have been paid thousands of taxpayer money. Issues like the handbook, work environment of the Commission has still gone unaddressed. The office remained closed for months due to a myriad of reasons and revenue lost. I say this to say that the Board has pressing matters to address that the day to day, administrative functions of the Commission should be left to the Director. This legislation establishes a clear line of demarcation between the two and as such, I ask that each of you vote in favor of this bill. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify and I stand available to answer any questions.