

Testimony of Mervin Smith, President of East End Taxi Association
Bill No. 35-0186

I, Mervin Smith, President of East End Taxi Association, reside on the island of St. Thomas and is representing more than 3,000 +/- concerned taxi operators and medallion owners territorially. I have been invited to testify on Bill No. 35-0186 the Transportation and Taxicab Services Bill before the Committee on Government Operations, Veteran Affairs and Consumer Protection.

I along with the 3,000 +/- taxi operators and medallion owners who have signed the attached petition, strongly oppose any Bill that would disassemble the Virgin Islands Taxicab Commission from being a Semi-Autonomous agency to a Division under the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs, who has profoundly contributed to the failure of the Taxi Division. The Inspector General's Audit dated August 29, 2005, when the Taxicab Commission was a Division of the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs found that the Division failed to collect fees; failed to keep accurate records; failed to account for funds collected, etc., and despite the Inspector General's recommendations to include digitizing the then Division, the Taxicab Commission, some 3 plus decades later continues to operate as a pen and paper operation. Why move it back under a department where it is documented that it failed?

We, the taxicab operators strongly appeal to you the 35th Legislature to remove Bill 35-0186 from the Tuesday, November 21st, 2023, agenda, repeal Section 2 and 3 of Act No. 7561, and place limousines back under the jurisdiction of the Taxicab Commission. Furthermore, we implore you as a Legislative body to work with the Commission's Executive Director who has been requesting funding to digitize the agency's daily operations, and to hire adequate staffing by amending Act No. 8768.

Various members of the 35th Legislature have placed emphasis on saving the "last locally owned business" while expressing passionately about how their parent being a medallion owner/taxi operator was the only source of income that fed and provided the daily means of support for the family. Are you now saying that we should not be afforded the same opportunity to provide for our families?

How much longer will greed, malicious intent, and politics take precedence over our people? When are you going to realize how valuable this industry is to those of us who depend on providing taxi services to feed our families, send our children to school, pay our mortgage/rent, medical expenses, light, water bill, etc.? In fact, do you have an honest interest of the squeaky wheel that gets the oil which is our tourism product?

We, the 3,000+ taxi operators and medallion owners territorially stands firmly against Bill No. 35-0186. We shall no longer tolerate being the vote you seek at election time. Instead of addressing our concerns, you are here taking bread out of our mouths. Just remember we have family and friends that are eligible voters and support our cause. All of you know what the real problem is. Replace the ineffective Board with individuals who are knowledgeable about the automobile for hire industry so at the end of the day the automobile for hire industry in the Virgin Islands of the United States will be respected and recognized as the Tourism Ambassadors that our visitors return to year after year to enjoy the sea, sun, and sand in America's Paradise.

Let your conscience be your guide here today. Look around you both inside and outside of this institution and know that we the taxi operators on the islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John STAND TOGETHER and shall NO LONGER allow politicians to destroy the last local business standing in this territory. We are here to make our voices be heard loud and clear. Enough is enough. VOTE NO to BILL NO. 35-0186. Provide the Virgin Islands Taxicab Commission with the necessary funding needed to digitize and hire additional staff. Furthermore, it's time to get rid of the wasted Board members whose terms have long expired, and replace them with people who truly have the automobile for hire industry at heart.

We thank you for the opportunity to appear here today so that we can make our voices be heard.