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V.I. Legislature Considers 1 Percent Budget Increase for Fiscal Year 2024

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Senate President Novelle Francis, Jr. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

In a recent session of the 35th Legislature's Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance, the focus was on increasing transparency regarding the legislature's budget. For the first time, Senate President Novelle Francis and the V.I. Legislature's Executive Director Cobell Sheridan presented the spending plan for the legislative branch of the government.

Mr. Francis discussed the primary objectives of the legislature, such as transitioning to a paperless system, improving accessibility for the public, and investing in professional development. He acknowledged that the legislative budget has not grown at the same rate as those for the executive and judicial branches, which has hindered the achievement of community expectations.

In light of this, lawmakers are considering a 1% increase to last year's budget, making the total allocation \$24.4 million for the fiscal year 2024. The operational costs would remain the same as the previous three years at \$21 million, while an additional \$106,000 is proposed for achieving specific goals outlined by the Senate president.

Sheridan offered a detailed breakdown of the proposed operational budget, with 31% (or \$6.4 million) allocated for senatorial offices as per legal requirements, 6% (or \$1.1 million) for committees, and the remaining \$13.2 million for general operations. She noted that aside from direct appropriations, one revenue source is the royalties from the publication of the Virgin Island code. She also highlighted a plan to develop a merit-based system for pay increases, undergirded by the implementation of a learning and performance management software application. "In future years we will ask not for across-the-board increases but merit based increases from zero to 7%," Ms. Sheridan told lawmakers.

No questions were posed to the testifiers during the hearing, reflecting a general consensus that debating the budget among those who had helped compile it would be redundant.

In concluding the budget presentation session, it was noted that the proposal was indicative of the appreciation for the legislative staff's efforts. The aim is to foster greater transparency and public understanding of how taxpayer dollars are utilized within the legislative branch, Senate leaders said.