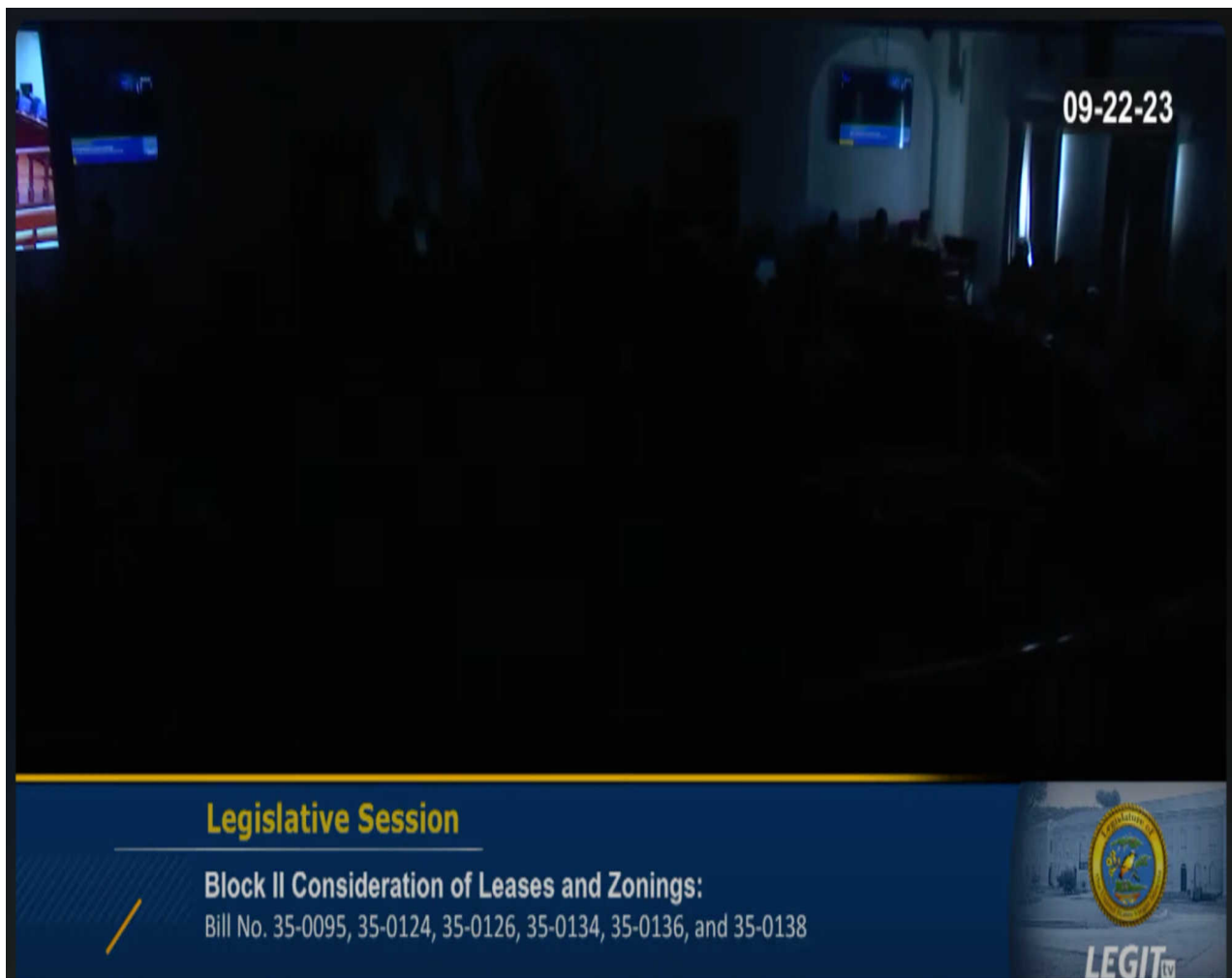


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Budget, Leases, and Blackouts: Senators Pass Key Measures During Session Amid WAPA Outages

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A view of the darkened legislative chamber during one of Friday's power outages
YouTube screenshot.

In a lengthy legislative session on Friday which was interrupted by several power outages, lawmakers confirmed two nominees to key boards in the territory, voted to approve several leases and zoning changes, and passed the appropriations bills for funding government operations in fiscal year 2024, among other actions.

Lionel Selwood, who has built a career in the energy sector, had been nominated to sit on the Water and Power Authority Governing Board. He sailed through earlier

confirmation hearings with praises and accolades from lawmakers, a circumstance which did not change during Friday's legislative session. Senator Franklin Johnson called him one of the "better candidates" for WAPA's board that the Senate has considered. "We definitely need his experience to help straighten out that mess," Mr. Johnson opined.

Similarly, Angel Dawson, who was recently appointed as the Administrator of the Government Employees Retirement System (GERS), was welcomed to the post by senators. Senator Milton Potter said that there was "no one else who I'm aware of who would be a better fit" for the task of leading GERS to stability and growth. After the vote in his favor, Mr. Dawson described government as a trust, and its employees as trustees, all working on behalf of the people of the territory. He pledged to work with the current and future legislatures to "fulfill the sacred trust we have to our retirees and to our government employees."

After the nominees were approved, lawmakers turned their attention to proposed leases and zoning changes. The leases, previously [vetted and approved](#) by the committees on Budget, Appropriations and Finance as well as Rules & Judiciary, were also met with the approval of the of the entire Senate body. The request for zoning changes on the island of St. Croix had been heard earlier in the day by the Committee of the Whole. Presented by Leia LaPlace-Matthew, territorial planner at the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, the first rezoning request was for the former Outrigger Hotel, Restaurant, and Yacht Club, destroyed by fire decades ago. Although a building permit had been previously issued for renovation of the structure into a gym and fitness center, the property owner now wants to restore the hotel, restaurant and marina operation.

Currently, the area is zoned R4 for residential use, but the hotel operations had previously been grandfathered in. However, because the property has sat disused for so long, there is a need to adjust the strictly-residential use zoning of the area, a move supported by several adjacent property owners. Ms. LaPlace-Matthew told lawmakers that rezoning the property as R3, a less restrictive classification, would allow for the redevelopment of the property and the return of an operational hotel, restaurant, bar and marina to the town of Christiansted. "The department is in favor of town properties having increased use opportunities to spur redevelopment in our towns," Ms. LaPlace-Matthew told senators.

The second rezoning request considered and approved by lawmakers on Friday was for a parcel in Estate Paradise. Currently, the 12.62 acre parcel 4 is being used to store trucks, used equipment, and scrap metal. It is out of compliance with its current zoning category, said Ms. LaPlace-Matthew, and the rezoning from R2 - low density residential, to C - Commercial, would remedy that breach and facilitate the expansion of the business. DPNR says that this area is no longer suitable for residential development, given its proximity to the airport. "The department recognizes the C-Commercial Zoning will keep the property in conformity with the zoning and light industrial character already found in this area south of the highway," Ms. LaPlace-Matthew said.

The third use variance request was for plots 19 and 20 in Frederiksted, which is currently zoned R4 - medium density residential. The lessees of the 9625 square foot property, CAT 5 Builders LLC, wish to turn it into a building contractor's office, along with shops, yards, and general contractor services. Like with the former Outrigger Hotel, the former non-residential use of the property had been previously grandfathered in, but that clause

has since expired, hence the need for reclassification. “The proposed use would not be out of character with the surrounding area’s zoning and character,” Ms. LaPlace Matthew noted.

Lawmakers were particularly enthusiastic about the prospects for the company to make a positive impact on the territory’s homebuilding capacity. “Without homes, our [workforce] capacity will never grow,” noted Sen. Johnson. Senator Alma Francis Heyliger also noted the specific need of Virgin Islanders for construction and contracting services as the territory continues to recover from the devastating effects of the 2017 hurricanes.

Several pending bills also passed their final legislative hurdle on Friday. Bill 35-0082, seeking to limit [suspension and expulsion](#) of young students, was approved by the full Senate. Bill 35-0083, which establishes [separate horse racing commissions](#) for each district, and its related measure Bill 35-0073, dealing with the duties and powers of each commission, along with anti-doping regulations for racehorses, were also sent up to the governor for consideration. The budget bills, which fund operations for the next fiscal year for the three branches of government as well as all autonomous and semi-autonomous agencies and organizations receiving subventions from government, were also passed on Friday. Lawmakers further voted to continue the government’s group insurance policies with Cigna, United Healthcare, and Standard Insurance.

Towards the end of the session, lawmakers approved a resolution honoring the VI National Guard, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, and reprogrammed \$4.9 million from capital projects under the Virgin Islands Public Finance Authority to various other projects.