

Rules and Judiciary Committee Approves One PSC Candidate, Reject Another

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Janeke Simon **September 29, 2023**

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Laura Nichols-Samms. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

On Thursday, the Senate Committee on Rules and Judiciary met to, among other things, consider two key nominations to the Public Services Commission, the powerful entity that regulates utility providers in the territory.

Lawmakers considered Sandra Setorie for the role of PSC executive director. If approved, Ms. Setorie would come to lead the agency she joined in April 1996 as the PSC's administrative official on St. Croix.

Establishing her suitability for the role, Ms. Setorie noted her service as a member of the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissions, and her graduation from the Institute of Public

Utilities at Michigan State University, where she completed the annual regulatory studies program for industry professionals.

Her personal experiences as a resident of the Virgin Islands will also be brought to bear, Ms. Setorie told lawmakers. “I live the nexus of utilities issues that often trouble our territory,” she said. “I have been on the receiving end of less-than-quality service, increased billings, and at times unfair practices.” These keenly felt deficiencies serve to fuel Ms. Setorie’s determination to make a difference. “I counsel our team to leave no stone unturned to provide the best possible representation on behalf of those that we serve,” she told lawmakers. She offered an insider’s perspective of the workings of the commission – “though it is not always evident, important progress is being made to transform the provision and delivery of public necessities,” she said.

Speaking of her ability to manage the demanding executive role, Ms. Setorie noted that she “earned three university degrees while holding full-time jobs and raising my children.” She also argued that she has “effectively co-managed the Public Services Commission” over the last two decades.

Ms. Setorie cast herself as an agent of change at the PSC, someone she says is needed “to meet the needs of our communities to improve performance, balance growth and advance the resilience of our PSC team, our people and our critical infrastructure.” Responding to questions from lawmakers about what she would do differently from previous office-holders, Ms. Setorie said that she wanted to work on “increasing and improving the technology productivity of the [PSC].”

Meanwhile, St. John resident Laura Nichols-Samms was being considered for an appointment to the PSC Board of Commissioners, the body that makes decisions about rates and compliance matters for the utilities. “Our utility companies are the backbone of our community,” Ms. Nichols-Samms said to committee members. “When these utilities falter, our daily routines come to a screeching halt.”

Ms. Nichols-Samms spoke of her business background, stating that she has been self-employed for 23 of the 26 years she has been resident in the Virgin Islands. She described the PSC as being a “bridge between the utility providers and the consumers,” and said that she would push for modernization efforts and a greater adoption of clean energy solutions that could reduce chronically high rates for electricity.

Lawmakers quizzed Ms. Nichols-Samms on her qualifications. “What technical expertise do you bring that would be an asset to this Commission?” asked Committee chair Diane Capehart, who referred to the confirmation process as a “job interview.” Ms. Nichols-Samms noted that she is “familiar with working on a board before,” and expressed confidence that technical knowledge would be gained through the training provided by the PSC. “I really enjoy studying and learning new things,” she responded.

Senator Milton Potter, however, noted that the previous Legislature added specific criteria for appointments to certain boards, including the PSC. Those criteria include academic experience in one of a number of technical fields – engineering, power generation, energy or natural resources, conservation, economics, finance, accounting, public administration, telecommunications, and law among them. Ms. Nichols-Samms said that her business management degree from the University of Maryland included accounting as part of the curriculum, and noted that she has also undertaken some study in legal research. “So I do have some of the recommendations that they do request.”

Ms. Nichols-Samms also noted that she has been paying close attention to PSC hearings, “because I as a consumer want to know what’s going on.”

When it came time for a vote, Ms. Setorie's nomination was easily approved. However, the nomination of Ms. Nichols-Samms did not receive the nod from Rules & Judiciary Committee members. A first motion on the matter failed with 4 "no" votes to two "yes". After a recess, Senator Angel Bolques Jr., who supported Ms. Nichols-Samms's nomination, raised a point of order. "I wanted to inquire through legal counsel concerning if it was moved forward properly," he said, prompting Sen. Capeheart to immediately call another recess.]

After the second recess, a motion was offered by Senator Kenneth Gittens to vote down Ms. Nichols-Samms nomination, which passed by a 3-2 margin. As such, the committee's favorable vote for Ms. Setorie's nomination as well as its unfavorable vote on Ms. Nichols-Samms's candidacy will now be forwarded to the full body for further consideration.