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Missed Opportunities and Lack of Cooperation Highlighted as Emancipation Committee's Extension Sparks Senate Debate

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Emancipation Committee chair Carol Burke. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

On September 13, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. extended the tenure of the territory's 175th Emancipation Commemoration Committee to July 31, 2024. Emancipation Committee chair Carol Burke, testifying before the Senate Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports & Parks on Thursday, told lawmakers that the extension was to facilitate "projects and programs that still have to go on," including the enhancement of Emancipation Drive which was delayed by a water project.

Almost immediately, Senator Angel Bolques, the Culture Committee chair, suggested that the extension of the committee's life become permanent. "I see the Emancipation Committee as something that needs to operate in perpetuity in order for us to ensure that our history does not fall through the cracks."

Ms. Burke agreed that the committee should be institutionalized. "One of the major responsibilities that we have is to make recommendations to the Legislature and the governor about the future of emancipation and I think it's an opportune time to really put it where it should rightfully be forever." She noted that the work already done by the committee has served to uncover even more of the territory's history and culture than needs to be preserved.

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger raised questions regarding the financial implications of the extension. She asked, "Are these costs already accounted for, or is there a need for additional funding from the Legislature?" Ms. Burke replied, "I don't believe there's an additional cost." However, this answer did not satisfy Ms. Francis-Heyliger, who noted a discrepancy between the Emancipation Committee's financial estimates and the information provided to the senators.

"Your earlier statement says you don't think we're going to go over, but based on the expense report you just gave me you will go over or you've already gone over," Sen. Francis-Heyliger noted. Rather than reliance on information given to them from the Office of the Governor, the lawmaker suggested that the committee employ the services of their own accountant to better track their funds. Ms. Burke pushed back on that idea. "Senator Francis, we don't have a treasurer and we don't need a treasurer," she said. "We operate under the Office of the Governor and all of our transactions are handled through the Office of the Governor."

However, Ms. Francis-Heyliger insisted on receiving a better accounting of the Emancipation Committee's finances. "When individuals come before me, I have to make sure that I'm checking to verify how we spend people's money," she reminded the testifiers before her. "So I'm hoping that I could get a better breakdown of the funding and a better explanation."

Along the lines of funding, Mr. Bolques wondered whether some expenditure could have been saved by having the Department of Tourism foot at least some of the bills instead, citing the publication of Emancipation activities in *Essence* magazine as one such example where the Tourism Department could have assisted. Ms. Burke agreed that that should have been done, but said, "regrettably, that didn't happen." She noted that VI law designates the Department of Tourism as being responsible for promotion of the territory, and that "the VI Code relating to Freedom Week says specifically [that the] V.I. Tourism Department should play a vital role in promoting, uplifting, and celebrating Emancipation." However, as the July 3 date for Emancipation drew closer, Ms. Burke said that the committee realized that they would have to do it themselves. "We were lucky enough to be able to contact [*Essence*], but you're absolutely correct."

Sen. Francis-Heyliger highlighted potential overlaps between the Emancipation Committee, which might be established to function indefinitely, and other entities formed for similar goals. She sought clarity on the role of the Virgin Islands Cultural Heritage Institute. In reply, former senator Myron Jackson explained that the 32nd Legislature moved the Institute from the Department of Planning and Natural Resources to the Department of Tourism. "The governor appointed the board, but its implementation is still pending with the Department of Tourism," Mr. Jackson added. He further noted that, as of now, it no longer operates within the Department of Tourism.

The news further angered Senator Francis-Heyliger. “We as a body keep creating these laws to advance our history, advance our culture, but we just don’t set them up.” She cited the never-functional Institute as “something that’s sitting on the books that was funded under the Department of Tourism...and no one has bothered to make sure that it exists and can do the work.” Having discussions about institutionalizing the Emancipation Commemoration Committee while a body meant to do the same work sits defunct, “is a prime example of why we keep dropping the ball,” the senator lamented. “We have to stop it.”

Ms. Burke argued that part of the reason for the extension of the Emancipation Committee’s life is so that “the Department of Tourism and the other departments who could have given more resources” had the opportunity to “come on board and be part of” the commemoration of emancipation as originally intended.

Senator Samuel Carrion expressed his displeasure at the lack of synergy between various governmental departments and agencies. “It’s very disheartening and upsetting,” he noted. “This was our moment in time in history, and I for one expected more.” However, he was optimistic that opportunities still existed to make an impact. “This was a historical moment – it still is. We still have time to do stuff.”

The lack of participation by other government bodies incensed Sen. Francis-Heyliger, who said this meant that some of the \$1 million budget allocated to the Emancipation Committee, of which Ms. Burke said approximately \$650,000 was expended, was wasted on work that another agency should have rightfully performed. “It was not their option to get up and walk away from the table and not do what they were ordered to do,” she complained. “That’s costing us more money.”

For her part, Ms. Burke rued the missed opportunities for collaborating with various arms of government to enhance the commemorative activities. “I really would have liked to have done more education-wise,” she mused. She refuted accusations that the committee was hostile to community engagement. “We wanted the engagement from the very beginning. We had a planning meeting in September with all the government departments, including education and tourism. They were all at the table, they just never stayed.”

She said that recruiting support from the other government departments while at the same time managing the functions of the Commemoration Committee proved to be too much. “The support that we expected and should have got wasn’t there,” Ms. Burke said, noting that DPNR as well as the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation did provide assistance “in a number of areas...but Education wasn’t there.”

Senator Milton Potter expressed hope that with the Emancipation Committee’s extended life, there would now be a greater focus on education and engagement. “I would have liked to have seen poetry contests, spoken word contests among our young people, and dramatization opportunities for young people to make history come alive.”

The failure of the Emancipation Commemoration Committee to truly maximize the observance of the territory’s 175th anniversary of Emancipation this year was keenly felt by many in the community, including former senator Janelle Sauraw, who [penned an op-ed](#) to express her disappointment.