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Governor's Nominees for Key Leadership Roles Approved by Rules and Judiciary Committee

Governor Bryan's selections for critical roles gain Senate committee's support and approval

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Upper I2r: Kevin McCurdy, Nathalie Hodge and Louis Petersen. Lower I2r: Bert Petersen and DonnaChristensen

Governor Albert Bryan for various key leadership positions across the USVI have received the stamp of approval from the Committee on Rules and Judiciary on Thursday.

The first, Harriett Nathalie Hodge, is the commissioner nominee at the V.I. Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs (DLCA). She told lawmakers that the last 90 days had been spent becoming familiar with staff, evaluating the department, and crafting short and long-term goals.

Among these, Ms. Hodge revealed, is a desire to “conduct regular training sessions with staff on the latest consumer protection laws and licensing procedures” to boost internal morale. She announced plans to “reinstate biannual town hall meetings,” update DLCA’s website, and “reduce the licensing application processing time significantly.” She expressed a desire to increase enforcement, implement technological enhancements, enhance consumer protection and increase compliance.

There have been recent efforts to place the embattled Virgin Islands Taxicab Commission back under the auspices of DLCA, though legislation to that effect was recently held back for further review and amendments. When asked by Senator Milton Potter about the pros and cons of such a move, Ms. Hodge welcomed that oversight responsibility. “I think we’re ready to do so,” she responded. “Our systems are up and running.”

Ms. Hodge received a favorable vote from lawmakers, as did Louis E. Petersen, Jr., commissioner nominee for the V.I. Department of Agriculture, who had previously served in that role. His prior experience, he said, afforded him “meaningful insights” making him fit to lead D.O.A. once more. He defined his vision for the department as one that will “enhance the professional infrastructure and resource capacity of the agency to maximize the delivery of programs and services to the farming community.” He outlined plans to combat low staff morale and equally low salaries and promised to focus on “developing young farmers from an entrepreneurship perspective.”

While Sen. Potter posited that there is “no one better suited” to lead the Department of Agriculture, his colleague Senator Franklin Johnson obviously disagreed, becoming the only “nay” vote on the motion to favorably move Mr. Petersen’s nomination out of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, and to the full body for final approval.

Third on Thursday’s agenda was the governor’s nomination of Kevin McCurdy to serve as commissioner of the VI Department of Finance. Mr. McCurdy, who first worked in the Office of Management and Budget, assured that his “commitment to excellence and passion for public service will positively impact the government’s trajectory.” Like the other nominees, he outlined several goals to be worked toward if confirmed, including reviewing and updating “operational policies and procedures,” attracting and recruiting “qualified financial professionals to fill critical positions within the department,” and providing active guidance and training to department staff. In the long term, he promises to, among other goals, “explore investment strategies to maximize returns on surplus funds while maintaining risk-appropriate investments.”

Following his testimony, Mr. McCurdy was grilled by Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger who took umbrage to his signing onto the decision to veto the renaming of a bridge in honor of Wayne “Facts Man” Adams. The veto included language that suggested that members of the general public were not well suited to have roads, bridges, and buildings named after them, that those honors were reserved for notable elected officials and renowned public servants. That determination, argued Sen. Francis-Heyliger, was tantamount to being “elitist.” Although she acknowledged that these were the sentiments of Governor Bryan, she wondered whether Mr. McCurdy felt the same.

“I believe character and capability go hand in hand,” said Francis-Heyliger, whose non-member status prevented her from voting on his nomination in committee. The governor’s nominee admitted that he was “not sure how to respond,” while Committee Chair Senator Diane Capehart directed her colleague to make her comments during the full body’s session.

Before voting in his favor, Senator Donna Frett-Gregory cautioned Mr. McCurdy: “Department of Finance knows what my pet peeves are when it comes to fund balances and the like,” said the chair of the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance. “If you're going to be successful, just know that you can't fix everything at once,” she advised. Instead, Mr. McCurdy could “set the framework for others to follow.”

Lawmakers also voted in favor of the governor's nomination of Bert M. Petersen Jr., M.D and Donna M. Christensen, MD to serve on the Board of Trustees of the University of the Virgin Islands. Sen. Johnson observed that they both “bring a lot of wealth and knowledge to the board of trustees,” and Sen. Potter, in keeping with the day's overall tone, said he was “very excited” and trusts that their “presence on the board will definitely pay dividends.”

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