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Gittens Introduces Bill to Establish V.I. Commission of Ethics & Conflicts of Interest

Bill 35-0227 aims to establish a Commission of Ethics & Conflicts of Interest, reducing the V.I. Attorney General's oversight role and introducing new procedures for investigating and enforcing ethical standards among public officials

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Senate Majority Leader Kenneth Gittens is set to introduce a bill aimed at addressing corruption and holding public officials and employees accountable when the Committee on Rules and Judiciary meets on Thursday, Mr. Gittens's office announced Wednesday.

Bill 35-0227, which establishes the V.I. Commission of Ethics & Conflicts of Interest, will provide guidelines for the commission members and the hiring of staff. This bill will be heard

alongside its companion bill, 35-0228, which includes three key components.

Mr. Gittens explained that the primary aim of the bill is to reduce the role of the V.I. Attorney General's Office in overseeing ethics and conflict of interest laws. Instead, the office will work in conjunction with the Commission on Ethics & Conflicts of Interest to enforce these laws, particularly when criminal activity is suspected.

According to the senator, the bill will also establish procedures for investigating, enforcing, and appealing ethical and conflict of interest violations by public officers and employees. "This particular section also establishes the ethics commission fund, while section 3 makes an appropriation of \$500,000 to the commission for operating expenses," Mr. Gittens said. He added that he anticipates the need to secure an additional \$500,000 to ensure the commission operates effectively and efficiently.

Mr. Gittens emphasized that this bill has been developed with input from various stakeholders to address the complexities of ethical concerns and potential conflicts of interest faced by public officials and employees. "We've recently seen some of the grey areas that have been crossed and other blatant alleged bad acts by public officials and employees," he said. "I believe that by providing a strong framework for guidance, investigation, and enforcement, the commission will see to it that public officials and employees follow the highest ethical standards in their actions and decision-making."

The Majority Leader expressed his eagerness for discussions on the measure, highlighting its importance in improving government integrity. "Ultimately, this Ethics and Conflicts of Interest Commission will protect and uphold the public interest and encourage a culture of accountability and culpability," he stated. "Through combined efforts with stakeholders, professionals in ethics, and the wider community, our goal is to create an effective and impartial commission that will serve as a model for ethical governance practices in the Territory."

The Rules and Judiciary hearing is scheduled for 9:00 a.m. on Thursday, July 18th. Bills 35-0227 and 35-0228 will be vetted in Block IV of the agenda. Invited testifiers include representatives from the V.I. Attorney General's Office, The V.I. Bar Association, The Office of the Territorial Public Defender, V.I. Inspector General's Office, and The League of Women Voters.