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Senate Committee Approves Nominations of Ernest Morris Jr. as Superior Court Judge and Harith Wickrema for Conservation Board

Nominations for Superior Court Judge and Conservation District Board Member move forward

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From left to right, Magistrate Earnest Morris Jr., and Harith Wickrema. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

The Committee on Rules and Judiciary has approved two nominations sent down by Governor Albert Bryan Jr for further consideration.

The first was the nomination of Ernest Morris Jr. to take on the mantle of Superior Court Judge in the St. Croix district. Mr. Morris currently serves as a magistrate judge in the district and boasts an accomplished legal career, including his service on the Judicial Council of the National Bar Association's Memorial Good and Welfare Committee. Magistrate Morris has been admitted to the Virgin Islands Bar Association, American Bar Association, and Bar Association of the Supreme Court of the United States.?

He testified to the vast number of cases he has presided over, including 305 probate cases. According to him, there was a 100% clearance rate in probate cases in the St. Croix district in FY2023. "I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge my role in the significant reduction of probate cases," he noted, explaining that his clearance rate is 258%. If confirmed as a Superior Court Judge, Morris would preside over civil jury and non-jury matters and criminal matters where the maximum penalty is one year of incarceration or more.

Magistrate Morris affirmed to lawmakers that his goal is "not to do the bare minimum needed to meet my mandate, but to achieve excellence in every aspect." He promised lawmakers that he would use his case management skills "to help reduce the significant backlog of criminal and civil cases on the extensive docket that I will inherit as a trial court judge."

Repeating the adage that justice delayed is justice denied, Morris vowed that "if confirmed, I will strive to eliminate unnecessary and unjustified delays in the administration of justice." Morris said he is aware of the major backlog in civil matters before the courts, but warned lawmakers that "until we dedicate resources specifically to the Civil Division...it will be very difficult for us to reduce the backlog.

Both in his testimony and in responses to Senators Marvin Blyden and Milton Potter, Morris suggested using a "differentiated case system" to speed up the disposition of cases within the judicial system. The pair were among several lawmakers to voice support for his nomination. Senator Carla Joseph, too, commended him for "stepping up to the plate once again and to rise to a higher level in our judicial branch as a judge of the Superior Court."

"I love the job that I have now as a magistrate judge, but I think that I can contribute to the court in another capacity as superior court judge," said Morris. All present committee members voted in favor of his nomination.

Lawmakers were also supportive of the nomination of Harith Wickrema to serve on the V.I. Conservation District for the district of St. John. He told lawmakers that he "[embraces] the prospect of being part of the effort to revitalize the role of this important entity that can serve the people of the territory." By his own admission, he has advocated for the protection of the territory's natural resources since relocating to the USVI in 2008. "My dedication to sustainability and environmental responsibility spans my entire life," he noted. Mr. Wickrema recounted the many accomplishments of Island Green Living since volunteering as a board member, including diligently working to divert 1 million pounds of waste including plastic and aluminum cans away from landfills.

Among his many passions within the environmental and sustainability realm is composting. "Our green and brown debris is definitely not waste; it is a valuable resource that can return to nourish and enrich our soil through composting," Mr. Wickrema stated. "Our farmers and agriculture sector are in desperate need of compost, and the people in our territory are in desperate need of our farmers' success."

“Should my nomination be approved, there is so much we can accomplish,” he told lawmakers, who then voted to support his appointment. Senator Diane Capehart shared that she was “totally impressed” and noted that his joining the board would result in a quorum, “so things could start happening.”

?As the only member representing the St. John district, Ms. Capehart wondered what his advocacy priorities would be. “Soil health is a major issue,” Mr. Wickrema disclosed, but affirmed that “we are one territory, and the priorities we will agree on collectively is what I will work on.”

His nomination and that of Ernest Morris will now be considered by the full body.?

On Thursday, lawmakers also vetted several bills that were heard in their respective committees of jurisdiction. Among them was Bill [35-0240](#), transferring the administration of the Government Insurance Fund from the Commissioner of the Department of Finance to the Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Labor. They also voted in favor of Bill [35-0262](#), an act appropriating \$1,434,950 in FY2024 from the Community Facilities Trust Fund for the pre-construction soft cost funding to prepare the Charlotte Amalie harbor for dredging.

Senators also supported Bill [35-0284](#), a 20-year lease agreement between the Government of the Virgin Islands and Role Enterprises Inc., doing business as Best Car Rental in Cruz Bay, St. John, and Bill [35-094](#), a lease agreement between the GVI and Banco Popular for a portion of a building in Kings Quarter, St. Thomas.

?The Committee on Rules and Judiciary also moved Bill [35-0195](#) to the full body. The bill seeks to honor Mr. Willard John for his many contributions to the youth and the culture of the Virgin Islands. They also voted on Bill [35-0239](#), commending Mrs. Claire Lorraine Brown Roker for her dedicated service to the Virgin Islands community. Finally, lawmakers showed their support for Bill 35-0242, a resolution honoring and commending Miguel Santos, Jr., aka “DJ Poppy Pops” for his contributions to the field of music.