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Federal Technical Assistance, Emergency Funding for Meals on Wheels Among Several New Bills Introduced During Marathon Legislative Session

Session results in passage of key bills addressing WAPA's grid issues, funding for Meals on Wheels, forensic exams for assault victims, track course completion, and honors for Kenneth Mapp and Willard John, along with several lease agreements

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The Earl B. Ottley Legislature in St. Thomas

In a regular session that started Monday during the day and went on well past midnight, lawmakers voted on a series of resolutions, leases, and bills that had already been vetted in relevant committees of jurisdiction. Lawmakers also took the opportunity to special-order new

bills and amendments.?

They included Bill 35-0312, introduced by Sen. Donna Frett- Gregory as a means to correct some of the troubles facing Virgin Islanders at the hands of the Water and Power Authority. Last week, legislators met with U.S. Secretary of Energy [Jennifer Granholm](#) where challenges with WAPA were discussed.

?According to Senator Frett-Gregory, Senate President Novelle Francis capitalized on the opportunity and “made a pitch for the possibilities of the Virgin Islands receiving technical assistance.” The USVI is currently in a state of emergency triggered by WAPA’s financial shortcomings. Customers continue to face rolling blackouts despite expensive efforts to keep the utility provider afloat.?

Senator Frett-Gregory noted that while an Incident Command is in place, “we have not actually asked for technical assistance from the federal government.” Her newly introduced bill therefore creates a requirement for WAPA to request technical assistance to “address the existing electrical grid infrastructure” and other matters including smart grids and the like. “It’s important for us to move legislation to address the challenges,” she said. Several senators have signed on to the bill, including Samuel Carrion, Marise James, Milton Potter, and Dwayne DeGraff.

Ms. Frett-Gregory has also taken steps to remedy a major issue brought to the attention of legislators last week. During the Department of Human Services budget defense, Commissioner Averil George revealed details of a massive \$300,000 funding gap for the [Meals on Wheels](#) program, resulting in a waiting list that legislators deemed unacceptable. The territory-wide waitlist is close to 100 people.

The unsavory news prompted the senator to also introduce Bill 35-0313, which appropriates \$100,000 in emergency funding to DHS for the Meals on Wheels program. “When there’s a community that does not take care of its elders, it speaks volumes about its leaders,” Frett-Gregory noted. Chair of the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services Ray Fonseca supported the measure, noting that Meals on Wheels often provides seniors with “the only hot meal they get in the day.”

Lawmakers also voted in favor of the newly introduced Bill 35-0301, which requires the government to fund forensic medical exams for victims of rape or unlawful sexual contact “regardless of whether the victim cooperates with law enforcement or has health insurance.” The bill was offered by Senator Javan James, and described by Senator Dwayne Degraff as “priceless.” According to the bill’s sponsor, the new law would create opportunities to access federal funds from the U.S Department of Justice designated for that purpose.

A third bill sponsored by Frett-Gregory, 35-0311, special ordered funding for the completion of the track course at the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School on St. Thomas, with an end goal of becoming a world-class facility. “It’s important for this to happen because there are two scheduled world-class track meets that will take place next year. So this is like us preparing for the Olympics,” she contended.

Among a series of other bills, leases and resolutions passed were that honoring former governor [Kenneth Mapp](#) and [Willard John](#), lease agreements between the GVI and Banco Popular, and the [GVI and Best Car Rental](#). Lawmakers also voted in favor of the transfer of the [Government Insurance Fund](#) to the Department of Labor, and Senator Kenneth Gittens’s bill that [criminalizes perjury](#) before the Legislature. The approving votes followed a heated debate between Mr. Gittens

and Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger, who insisted that Act 8587, sponsored by herself, was already too similar to what was being offered by the majority leader. Ultimately, although her colleagues disagreed, she and Senator Angel Bolques Jr. voted no.?

Lawmakers also overrode the governor's [veto of Bill 35-026](#), the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act - IDEA, sponsored by Senator Samuel Carrion. Refusing to affix his signature to the bill, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. said it would be "irresponsible to sign this expensive and cumbersome measure into law knowing that it is unfunded and that we are not able to meet the ambitious timeline proposed by the measure." Now, the executive branch will be required to find a way to meet the legal mandate imposed by the Legislature.

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