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Plaza Extra East Leads in Lowest Grocery Prices While DLCA Faces Scrutiny Over Market Basket Survey

Despite Plaza Extra East offering the lowest prices on St. Croix, legislators raised concerns about the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs' lack of analysis on grocery pricing trends and the survey's overall impact

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Produce section of Plaza Extra East. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

The value of the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs' Market Basket Survey was interrogated by lawmakers on Wednesday, as DLCA officials appeared before the Senate Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection.

As part of the department's mandate, the Market Basket Survey provides consumers with "up-to-date pricing information." Per DLCA, "the monthly market basket survey helps consumers identify which stores offer the best price for staple grocery items, regardless of the brand." Information is collected in-store by two DLCA employees each in St. Thomas and St. Croix, and by one employee in St. John.

Senator Milton Potter was interested, however, in the metrics used to measure "the value and impact of the Basket Studies." He learned from DLCA Commissioner Natalie Hodge that "there's no way to measure the impact." Director of Consumer Affairs, Matthew Paget, further explained that "there's no specific method that we use to track the effect of it." The DLCA instead relies on "feedback from individuals regarding the information that we put out." While Ms. Hodge understood the merit of such a request, she shared that the DLCA does not have an economist on staff. "We just don't have the expert level [or the] competent person on staff to conduct the surveys."

The explanations given prompted Mr. Potter to describe the Market Basket Analysis as simply "symbolic."

Committee chair Senator Carla Joseph, was perturbed by the revelations. She, too, questioned whether any analysis was conducted based on the data collected from the survey, particularly with the rising cost of basic goods like eggs. "What can we do collectively to look at how the supermarkets are actually costing and pricing some of these items?" she wondered.

Again, the answer from DLCA was that analysis could not currently be conducted. The department instead intends to rely on the data collected from a two-year cost of living analysis due to commence on December 31. She promised to apprise the Legislature of the findings, but admitted that "currently, we haven't been doing anything on that."

Despite lacking the ability to perform in-depth analysis of the data collected, DLCA intends to continue the Market Basket Survey, sharing the results on their website and social media pages. September's survey found that Plaza Extra East on St. Croix had the lowest cost for DLCA's 60-item basket, outperforming competitors by a significant amount. On St. Thomas, the 36-item basket was offered most cheaply by Pueblo in Long Bay, however the Subbase Pueblo and the Market were very close in cost. On St. John, DLCA found that their 11-item basket was being offered by Starfish Market at almost \$10 cheaper than the next most affordable location.