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Anger Over VIPOCC Salary Increases as Email Contradicts Senator Francis's Claims

Email obtained by the Consortium shows Senator Francis was among recipients of the report, despite his denial. Controversy mounts as public officials' pay hikes take effect, including \$95,000 for senators and \$192,088 for the governor

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Ernice Gilbert **January 07, 2025**

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The image shows an August 13, 2024, email to Senator Novelle E. Francis Jr., submitting the final VIPOCC report and thanking him, the Chief Justice, and the Governor for their support. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Anger and frustration aimed at lawmakers and executive branch officials erupted following an announcement by Government House on Sunday that large salary increases took effect on January

1, 2025, based on a report from the V.I. Public Officials Compensation Commission (VIPOCC). The report recommends a \$10,000 raise for senators, bringing their salaries to \$95,000, and increases of over \$40,000 for the governor and lieutenant governor, raising their salaries to \$192,088 and \$168,231, respectively.

This occurred without any discussions in the Senate, as the 90-day window mandated by the law governing the VIPOCC's report had expired. The 90-day timeframe was intended to allow senators to review the report and decide whether to accept, reject, or amend its recommendations.

Governor Albert Bryan confirmed that he received the report on August 13, 2024. The VIPOCC also confirmed that Senate President Novelle Francis and Supreme Court Chief Justice Rhys Hodge, along with VIPOCC board members, received the report via email on August 13. However, Senator Novelle Francis — the most important recipient in this matter — has disputed this, claiming he never received the email. Speaking to the Consortium on Monday, Mr. Francis described the situation as potentially a setup. After receiving the report on Sunday from Governor Bryan's press release, Mr. Francis said he consulted with the Senate's legal counsel to assess whether the salary increases were legally implemented. Mr. Francis also expressed frustration over not receiving a follow-up call from the VIPOCC board to confirm receipt of the email or a hardcopy of the report, which he described as an unacceptable oversight for a document of such importance.

However, the Consortium has obtained an email thread that confirms the recipients of the message sent by VIPOCC Chairman Haldane Davies. The email was addressed to Senate President Novelle Francis, Governor Albert Bryan, Chief Justice Rhys Hodge, and VIPOCC board members.

The full contents of the email are provided below. Email was sent to nfrancis@legvi.org, which matches Mr. Francis's email address on the V.I. Legislature's [website](#):

Sent: Tuesday, August 13, 2024 at 02:26:17 PM EDT

Subject: Virgin Islands Public Officials Compensation Commission (VIPOCC) Report

*Senator Novelle E. Francis, Jr
President, 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Charlotte Amalie
St. Thomas, VI 00804*

Dear Senator Francis:

*On behalf of the members of the Virgin Islands Public Officials Compensation Commission (VIPOCC) and pursuant to 3 V.I.C. * 544(a) and ACT #8384, I hereby submit the final VIPOCC Report for your attention.*

The Commission thanks you, the Chief Justice, and the Governor for the confidence placed in us to complete this work amidst the challenges along the way. We believe that the Territory's public service officials must render expert service at appropriate compensation levels, and trust that the results of the study and the recommendations made would help to grow and maintain a resilient public service.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any questions or need additional information.

Each branch of government was responsible for selecting three members to serve on the nine-member VIPOCC board. The Consortium [obtained a document](#) listing the Senate's appointees: Haldane Davies, Valdemar Hill, and Melanie J. Gomez, selected by then-Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory. Ms. Frett-Gregory has [criticized the VIPOCC process](#), citing the lack of transparency.

Originally, the law governing the VIPOCC called for 180-day timeframe for the Legislature to act on recommendations made by the VIPOCC. However, it was changed through an amendment sponsored by then-Senator Janelle Sarauw and supported by other lawmakers, to 90 days.

Mr. Francis maintains that he did not receive the email. While it's possible it landed in his junk folder, the senator has not indicated whether he has since searched his email to confirm or clarify this.

The VIPOCC report analyzed 41 benchmark positions across government to determine appropriate salary adjustments. These included roles in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, as well as key leadership positions in various departments and agencies.

While Governor Bryan claims that the salary increases took effect on January 1, the current submission from the VIPOCC failed to comply with the requirements of the law, as the [report](#) was issued two years late, in violation of [Act No. 8384](#), which mandated the first report be [submitted by May 2022](#). This delay raises questions about the validity of the governor's claim that the increases have already taken effect and places additional pressure on lawmakers to address the issue promptly.

The commission proposed increasing senators' salaries from the current \$85,000 to \$95,000. Additionally, the VIPOCC introduced longevity pay, granting a 5% annual increase for senators serving four or more terms based on the prevailing base salary. [In October 2020](#), senators' salaries were untethered from the lowest-paid commissioner's, effectively keeping their pay at \$85,000 as the salary of Department of Sports, Parks & Recreation Commissioner Calvert White increased to over \$100,000.

According to Government House, the VIPOCC, appointed in November 2021, faced delays due to funding and procurement issues.

Governor Bryan praised the commission's efforts in developing the report. "I want to thank the Virgin Islands Public Officials Compensation Commission for their dedicated work on this comprehensive report," he said. "As part of my commitment to transparency, I am informing the community of these changes, which are the result of legislation enacted by the Virgin Islands Legislature to address the compensation of public officials in a structured and informed manner."

The report highlights that public officials' salaries in the Virgin Islands are competitive within broader markets, averaging:

- 9% above the market 25th percentile.
- 1% above the market median.
- 3% below the market 75th percentile.

Governor Bryan emphasized the importance of these adjustments in supporting public service. "Our public officials serve critical roles in governing a Territory with unique challenges and responsibilities," he said. "The adjustments outlined in this report aim to ensure that public service remains a viable option for attracting and retaining skilled professionals while maintaining

fairness and fiscal responsibility.”

The study identified several positions that fall significantly below market standards, including:

- Attorney General: -19% below market median.
- Inspector General: -15%.
- Taxicab Commission Executive Director: -29%.

To address these disparities, the report proposed targeted increases, including:

- Commissioner of Labor: An 8.2% raise, bringing the salary to \$136,221.
- Supervisor of Elections: A 13.8% increase, raising the salary to \$127,556.

The VIPOCC recommended a six-grade pay system (E1 to E6) with standardized salary progression. Employees would receive 3% annual increments for years of service, up to the maximum of their pay grade. The plan also includes mechanisms for locality pay adjustments to account for the Virgin Islands' unique labor costs.

Governor Bryan praised the data-driven nature of the report and called the process transparent. "This process reflects the Legislature's intent to establish a data-driven and transparent approach to public officials' compensation," Mr. Bryan said. "I remain committed to keeping the community informed and ensuring that governance in the Virgin Islands operates in an open and accountable manner."

The proposed adjustments align with the average market 50th percentile, according to the report, with payroll costs projected to increase by 1.8% under the preferred Option II. The report also calls for comprehensive salary reviews every 4-5 years and annual or biennial cost-of-living adjustments of 2-3%.

The VIPOCC is composed of nine members, including Dr. Haldane Davies, who serves as Chairman, Ms. Melonie Gomez as Vice Chairwoman, and Ms. Asiah Clendenin-Gumbs as Secretary. Other members include Attorney Joel Holt, Attorney Henry Smock, Kenneth Hermon, Dr. Valdemar Hill Jr., Edward Thomas, and Frank Abednego.