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One Communications (Formerly Viya) Blasted in Senate Over Outsourcing, Tax Breaks, and Job Losses

Lawmakers grilled One Communications CEO Siobhan James-Alexander on the company's decision to move customer service jobs to Guyana while still benefiting from local tax incentives through UVI's RT Park program.

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ONE CEO Siobhan James-Alexander at a Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications hearing Wednesday. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

A name change did not shield One Communications, formerly Viya, from being repeatedly reprimanded by members of the Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications on Wednesday.

The complaints lobbed at the company [were not novel](#). In a committee meeting just two months ago, lawmakers focused on shaky service and the outsourcing of the customer service branch to Guyana. What was new at Wednesday's meeting, apart from the company's name change, was the person whose responsibility it was to pacify agitated lawmakers. That task fell to One Communications' recently appointed chief executive officer Siobhan James-Alexander.

"One Communications is a small fish in a very large pond. We compete with billion dollar companies... We need to be able to invest in technologies of the future... and we need to free up capital to do so as part of our continuing efforts to reshape the business," explained Ms. James-Alexander. "We've had to make some really tough decisions," she said, but maintained that One Communications has "been sensitive to the needs of our employees, particularly those who have served us for so long." The company has made "every effort to smooth the transition back into the broader workforce," the new CEO declared.

One Communications is a beneficiary of the University of the Virgin Islands' RTPark, and therefore enjoys tax incentives. Senator Clifford Joseph wondered "how is it that you're moving jobs outside of the Virgin Islands or the territory while benefiting from our territory?"

"We are investing heavily in Virgin Islanders becoming part of our workforce," responded Ms. James-Alexander. However, One Communications continues to assess how it can "be viable in an industry where cost is growing."

"We've had to make hard decisions," Ms. James-Alexander reiterated, echoing the words of her predecessor.

Senator Joseph was unmoved. "You're gaining from the Virgin Islands, and then you don't want to use the people here. It's not making any sense to me," he replied.

Answering a question from Senator Marvin Blyden, the One Communications CEO clarified. "About 80 percent – more than that – of our workforce is Virgin Islanders." Technicians, which make up the majority of the company's employees, "are Virgin Islanders, born [and] raised," Ms. James-Alexander noted. "If my calculations are correct, we have over 70 staff... that fall within that framework."

Lawmakers, however, focused their attention on the positions terminated in other departments. "Our local people are losing their jobs and then being outsourced to another nation... is there any reconsideration as you move forward in your strategy?" wondered Senator Carla Joseph. She repeated concerns about an eroding tax base that were expressed in March's committee meeting. Ms. James-Alexander responded that "it is something that is fluid, and we will continue to look at it" but maintained that One Communications continues to consider "what is the best for the company."

An increasingly vexed Senator Kurt Vialet joined the conversation. Referencing local workers, he asserted, as he did during the previous committee hearing on the issue, that One Communications is "systematically getting rid of those individuals, transferring those positions to Guyana and getting rid of Virgin Islanders."

"How can you say that that is a prudent financial decision?" he asked, dismissing the CEO's response that the company was trying to strike a "balance."

"It's not going to be allowed to just continue, that you could come into our territory, receive tax benefits and fire the local employees that are qualified and have been in key positions," Senator

Violet warned. He declared that when One Communications' RT Park certification expires in 2026, "it's a responsibility of this body to make sure that if that certificate is renewed, it's renewed under different guidelines."

As he did two months ago, Mr. Violet also urged that the University of the Virgin Islands' Research and Technology Park be more "transparent" and "have the same compliance rules and regulations that the Economic Development Authority has." The lawmaker implied that legislation to that effect would be forthcoming. "That is going to be codified so that no longer can companies come to the Virgin Islands and take advantage and import, and hire individuals in positions that were held by locally qualified Virgin Islanders," he said.

Ms. James-Alexander, born in Saint Lucia, previously worked at Digicel as the company's OECS product manager around the same time that former Viya CEO Geraldine Pitt, a native Virgin Islander, held the position of Digicel's Saint Lucia country manager.

As the conversation turned to the cost of doing business in the USVI versus Guyana, where One Communications has moved its call center, Ms. James-Alexander noted that "labor cost is cheaper in Guyana." Mr. Violet, however, asserted that "they're getting tax benefits to be in the Virgin Islands...we can't allow them to equate the 'oh, we could do it quicker or cheaper in Guyana.'" If the company is committed to moving jobs out of the territory, "they don't need to get the tax benefits in the Virgin Islands," the lawmaker declared.

"They're charging the highest amount that the economy is willing to pay. They're not cutting on anything. So we don't need to be here babying them," Senator Violet insisted. "Viya is not doing well for the Virgin Islands when it comes to employment and treating our people fairly. And we can't back off of it."

Senator Marise James, too, issued a word of caution. "We really need to do a deep dive into both the Economic Development Authority and the RT Park... We really need to look at whether these programs, and especially the EDC program, that is really created to stimulate employment in the Virgin Islands, is doing what it's supposed to do."