

Bill to Launch Local Meteorological Office Stalls in Committee Over Lack of Funding Source

Senator Ray Fonseca’s proposal to establish a Virgin Islands Meteorological Office was met with concern over cost, infrastructure readiness, and staffing. Despite support for the concept, the lack of a funding plan led to the bill being held in committee.

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Concerns over the cost of establishing an independent meteorological office in the Virgin Islands has stalled the progress of draft legislation in the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection.

On Tuesday, Senator Ray Fonseca presented Bill 36-0026 before the committee, a measure that seeks to establish the “Virgin Islands Meteorological Office” within the Virgin Islands Territorial

Emergency Management Agency. In a lengthy introduction, Mr. Fonseca told his colleagues that “this bill gives the USVI the capacity to track and to generate and to interpret weather data for ourselves.”

“We cannot afford to wait even three hours for updates from San Juan or from the National Weather Service in the continental United States,” he stated. The lawmaker anticipates that recent federal cuts to the National Weather Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration could pose further challenges for the territory.

Bill 36-0026 would create positions for a professional meteorologist and support staff to “monitor the local conditions using satellite, radar, weather stations and buoys.” A Doppler weather radar station would also be established, according to the draft legislation.

“This is more than weather. It's about building scientific capacity, about ensuring preparedness and about owning our future in the face of a changing climate,” argued Fonseca. “We should not have to call Puerto Rico to find out whether it's safe to swim at Magen's Bay or when a flash flood may strike Bovoni.”

Sanaa Burke, who recently obtained a bachelor of science in meteorology and climate science from the University of Delaware, was invited to testify. “The need for a local Meteorological Office is no longer a matter of convenience or academic interest. It is a necessity,” Ms. Burke stated. “The proposed Doppler radar station is a particularly critical component...this investment in infrastructure will enhance forecasting not only for emergency response, but also for daily applications such as aviation, marine operations and agriculture.”

The intent of Bill 36-0026 was also largely supported by VITEMA. Its assistant director, Ovid Williams, explained that the agency currently enjoys a “strong relationship with the National Weather Service in San Juan, Puerto Rico.” Creating a local met office, therefore, would “serve to enhance that relationship.” Mr. Williams anticipates that a meteorological office would “provide a much-needed technical input to San Juan National Weather Service for timely notification of weather conditions.”

However, he informed the committee that, where the Doppler radar weather station is concerned, there are several limitations. This, as VITEMA’s Emergency Operations Center at Herman Hill remains “several years behind schedule” and therefore cannot be a home for a radar weather station. Further, he warned legislators of the associated costs of establishing such an office, including “competitive salaries required to draw and retain qualified individuals,” training, educational material, travel allowances, vehicles, and weather instrument maintenance.” It is funding that VITEMA “does not possess,” Mr. Williams advised.

That lack of available funding as well as the established, free relationship with the National Weather Service in Puerto Rico caused pause for several senators. Committee chair Senator Avery Lewis first suggested hiring an individual to provide local meteorological information before realizing there would be attendant costs. “Then we have to get equipment and a whole host of things,” he thought out loud.

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger was ambivalent about the prospect. “After doing some extensive research over the past week or so, I have some major, major concerns,” she told her colleagues. The lawmaker dismissed Mr. Fonseca’s assertion that pertinent information from Puerto Rico is often delayed. “When it comes to flash floods, NOAA puts out that information almost instantaneously, roughly within zero to three minutes,” Francis Heyliger stated.

“Does the benefit outweigh the cost?” she asked. “If we were in a situation where we had millions of dollars to lick around at this current moment, I would be more than happy to support the bill...What you're potentially asking me as a legislator is to now come up with millions of dollars...to maintain something we're already getting for free,” Senator Francis Heyliger objected.

Senator Franklin Johnson, too, wanted to know whether VITEMA could “sustain this operation.” Mr. Williams’s response was just as succinct. “At this current funding ceiling, no sir,” he said. VITEMA also could not provide a dollar amount to run a meteorology office. “I’m not going to play games here and say let's go ahead with this not knowing where the funding source is coming from,” Johnson said.

The absence of several other committee members from Tuesday's hearing, hesitation from Senators Lewis, Johnson, and Francis Heyliger may have been the catalyst for Fonseca’s decision to ultimately hold the bill in committee.