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## Seniors Advocate for Access, Dignity in Mock Senate Session Focused on Public Infrastructure

**During the annual senior citizens mock session, participants debated a bill to improve access for the elderly and disabled, pushing for rest areas, special service lines, and better sidewalks—highlighting the urgent need for infrastructure reform**

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**Seniors attend the annual mock legislative session held in honor of Older Americans Month. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.**

After its cancelation in 2024 due to unfavorable weather conditions, the annual mock legislative session for senior citizens took place on Wednesday, part of Older Americans Month activities.

With the territory's senior citizens taking the reins of the V.I. Legislature, the question of ensuring equitable access to public spaces came up for discussion. Participants debated Bill 36-0000, which would establish adequate access and rest areas in public buildings for senior citizens and physically disabled persons. As is customary, Lydia Lettsome, who sat in the chair of Senate President Milton Potter for the day, granted each representative time to comment on the bill.

"This amendment will allow seniors and physically disabled persons to function well, comfortably and safely in their everyday lives," stated Rosalia Payne, who represented Senator Alma Francis Heyliger.

Sitting in for Senator Ray Fonseca, Esther Merla Phillips disclosed that she had survived a stroke eight years ago. She used her own reality as an example. "When I do decide to go and access the building, we usually have to have a dry run. We will go the day before," she explained. Her dry run includes checks for handicap parking, distance to the building, and working elevators. "I want to walk, but by the time you get there you're short of breath and you're panting." Ms. Phillip uses a wheelchair at times but admitted that her pride often pushes her to want to walk.

"I would like the fixing of the many potholes we have to go through every day, especially on the road to Estate Bordeaux," added Wilma Phillip, who sat in place of Senator Dwayne DeGraff.

Eloi Sylvester, representing Senator Hubert Frederick, reminded listeners that "any nation or country that considers seniors knows that seniors are the backbone of the country. When we support our seniors, we are saying to the youth that they can keep on growing because we have an interest in those who have laid the foundation."

Mr. Sylvester, like other speakers who followed him, also advocated for better pedestrian access across the territory. "We cannot walk on the road even when the lanes are prepared for the motorist. The line is drawn all the way to the extreme end of the grass," he complained. Pedestrians, he said, are forced to "go in the grass." He urged the construction of more sidewalks to increase accessibility.

"It was a time when we were all young and we didn't think about it. But many of us can look back now and see that the things we used to do and we are now challenged. I think that we owe it to ourselves and those that are coming to make things right," declared Clefryn Delande, who represented Senator Novelle Francis.

Several amendments to the mock legislation were also proposed, including one by Pearl Flax, who sat in place of Senator Clifford Joseph. She suggested the inclusion of language that would mandate public offices to make special lines available for seniors, "instead of waiting all day." Merlene Felicien, Senator Kurt Vialet's representative, agreed. "We stand up there for hours with one teller. By the time you finish, you need your cane to get out of the bank."

"This is more than a matter of convenience. It is a matter of dignity for every resident," said Phillipa Smith-Tyler, the stand-in for Senate Vice President Kenneth Gittens. She would later move an amendment to "include constructing sidewalks on all major roadways of the VI." "I have assisted many persons walking along Queen Mary Highway who are in danger of being hit by cars," she shared.

Senator Marvin Blyden's representative, Mary Harley, objected to the amendment. She used the Melvin Evans and Queen Mary highways as examples. "Where are you going to you going to assume that a senior and a disabled person, a physically disabled person, is going to traverse those roads on their feet?" she asked. "Who is going to pay to build those sidewalks?" According to Ms.

Harley, the amendment did not include a funding source. Mr. Delande, in his role as chair of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance, suggested utilizing GARVEE bonds.

Despite Ms. Smith-Tyler's best efforts to convince her colleagues, the amendment failed. The senior citizens would, however, provide unanimous support to its parent bill.

"As a community, we must assist in providing our seniors and disabled members the opportunity to continue to be self-sufficient," remarked Ms. Lettsome, the day's president. "Only through the ability to access public buildings and sidewalks readily and easily can they accomplish this goal of self-sufficiency."

"This is the best session of the year. I look forward to the session every year," said a delighted Senator Blyden. Lawmakers have pledged to take the comments and recommendations of the senior citizens into consideration as they proceed with their legislative responsibilities. "You're not just our elders, but you're our guideposts as well," said Senator Gittens.