

## Lawmakers Approve 31 Bills to Shape FY2025/2026 Budget Amid Warnings on Revenue Collection and Federal Cuts

The bills will form the FY2025/2026 budget after months of hearings. Senators highlighted the need for stronger tax collection and timely federal recovery projects, while funding priorities included healthcare, seniors, infrastructure, and education.

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After months of hearings, questioning, and a detailed review of government finances, lawmakers on Thursday advanced 31 bills that will form the FY2025/2026 budget. The package, vetted in the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance, reflects what legislators described as a balance of caution and optimism, as they confront reduced federal support, rising costs, and the urgent need to strengthen local revenue collection.

“I entered into this budget process mindful of the federal environment and the trickle-down effect on local programs, services and the communities from cutbacks in the federal funding,” said committee chair Senator Novelle Francis. The budget, he added, “represents both fiscal caution and optimism for the upcoming fiscal year.”

With federal clawbacks threatening several programs, senators emphasized that the government must generate revenue and collect taxes owed to keep the budget balanced. “We weren't able to fund everything, unfortunately, because we have a lot of money on the streets, and people need to pay their taxes,” said Senator Carla Joseph.

Senator Kurt Vialet agreed, warning that “if we don't collect the taxes, this budget won't be balanced, so the government must do a better job.” He also stressed that federally funded recovery projects must get underway soon. “We need those projects to start so that those monies can circulate in the economy and fuel this budget,” Vialet said. He expressed hope that by next year the territory might even achieve a surplus.

Other lawmakers shared confidence in the committee's work. Senator Hubert Frederick said members made “the most prudent decisions when it comes to the finances of this government,” focusing on “responsible budgeting” to avoid repeating mistakes. Senator Marise James added that the committee “put the money where we should put the money in terms of what we should value and prioritize in our community,” though she acknowledged that funding could not cover all needs.

Senator Ray Fonseca praised the budget as well and highlighted the \$500,000 appropriation for the Virgin Islands Center for Diabetes Excellence. Senator Joseph welcomed a \$200,000 allocation for the Department of Human Services' homemakers program, describing it as “a vital part of being able to provide for our seniors, especially those who are bedridden and they need that support.”

Healthcare received significant boosts, including \$1.5 million for the Charlotte Kimmelman Cancer Center ahead of its reopening and \$1.5 million for the Juan F. Luis Hospital's Cardiac Center. “The money is there in the budget so you could staff up,” Senator Vialet assured.

Other allocations included funding for streetlighting, community road repairs, the Virgin Islands National Guard, and homeownership opportunities. “The committee made sure that we looked out [for] our elders, our young people, our students, the hospital, health care facilities, all of the different government departments, especially those that's revenue generating,” said Senator Marvin Blyden.

Committee chair Francis cautioned that adjustments may still be needed. “We are equally mindful that there will be some need for modification as we go along,” he said, pledging to “monitor our revenues and make that modification necessary.”

The 31 bills forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary cover appropriations for nearly every corner of government. They include:

- Bill No. 36-0154: Lump-sum appropriation from the Health Revolving Fund to the Department of Health and a contribution to the General Fund.
- Bill No. 36-0155: Lump-sum appropriation from the General Fund to the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services Fund.
- Bill No. 36-0156: Appropriation from the Business and Commercial Properties Revolving Fund to the Department of Property and Procurement.
- Bill No. 36-0157: Appropriation from the Virgin Islands Lottery to the General Fund.
- Bill No. 36-0158: Appropriation from the District Public Road Fund to the Department of Public Works.
- Bill No. 36-0159: Appropriation from the Indirect Cost Fund for OMB, Personnel, Property and Procurement, and Finance.
- Bill No. 36-0160: Appropriation from the General Fund to the St. Croix and St. Thomas Capital Improvement Funds.
- Bill No. 36-0161: Appropriation of \$25.5 million to the Legislature of the Virgin Islands.
- Bill No. 36-0162: Appropriation of \$20 million from the Virgin Islands Insurance Guaranty Fund to the General Fund.
- Bill No. 36-0163: Appropriation for salaries and expenses of the Board of Elections and Supervisor of Elections.
- Bill No. 36-0164: Lump-sum appropriation from the School Construction, Maintenance and Capital Fund for repairs and maintenance of schools.
- Bill No. 36-0165: Appropriation of \$6 million from the Caribbean Basin Initiative Fund to the General Fund.
- Bill No. 36-0166: Appropriations from the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund to multiple government agencies.

- Bill No. 36-0167: Appropriation for salaries and expenses at the University of the Virgin Islands.
- Bill No. 36-0168: Appropriation for operating expenses of the Public Employees Relations Board and the Labor Management Committee.
- Bill No. 36-0169: Appropriation of \$1 million from the Virgin Islands Education Initiative Fund to the School of Construction, Maintenance and Capital Fund.
- Bill No. 36-0170: Appropriation for Waste Management Authority operations from the Sewer Waste Water Fund.
- Bill No. 36-0171: Appropriation for operating expenses of the Hospital and Health Facilities Corporation from the General Fund.
- Bill No. 36-0172: Appropriation for the Office of the Inspector General.
- Bill No. 36-0173: Appropriation for the Judicial Branch, Judicial Council, and Office of the Territorial Public Defender.
- Bill No. 36-0174: Appropriation from the General Fund for government operations (with technical amendments).
- Bill No. 36-0175: Appropriation for the Public Services Commission.
- Bill No. 36-0176: Appropriation from the General Fund to the St. John Capital Improvement Fund.
- Bill No. 36-0177: Appropriation for the Board of Education from the General Fund.
- Bill No. 36-0178: Appropriation from the Transportation Trust Fund to the General Fund and for BMV and Public Works operations.
- Bill No. 36-0179: Appropriation for the Career and Technical Education Board.
- Bill No. 36-0180: Appropriation for the Taxicab Commission.
- Bill No. 36-0181: Appropriation from the Anti-Litter and Beautification Fund for Waste Management Authority and Public Works.

- Bill No. 36-0182: Appropriation for Waste Management Authority operations from the General Fund.
- Bill No. 36-0186: Appropriation from the GVI/JPMC Charitable Fund, amended to \$6,074,209.
- Bill No. 36-0120: Appropriation of \$341,460 from the Virgin Islands Education Initiative Fund to the Department of Education for special education eligibility evaluations.