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Constitutional Convention Seeks 15-Month Extension, \$200K in Additional Funding to Complete Draft

Chairman Usie Richards says the Sixth Constitutional Convention needs until February 2027 to deliver a comprehensive, community-informed draft, urging lawmakers to grant more time and funds to ensure meaningful public engagement and expert review.

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Sixth Constitutional Convention and former Senator, Usie Richards. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

Only two days before the Sixth Constitutional Convention was due to submit its revised draft constitution, Chairman Usie Richards appeared before the Committee of the Whole to request an extension.

Sworn in in January 2025, Mr. Richards testified that the Convention began the “task of utilizing, revising, modifying, substituting or deleting parts of both the revised Organic Act of 1954 and the Fifth Constitutional Convention draft document in March of 2025.” As that process unfolded, however, the Convention’s delegates determined that a timeline extension for both the submission of the draft document to the governor and the date for public vote on the proposed draft would be needed, he explained.

The requested extensions push the various deadlines back by well over a year.

First, the delegates want to change the submission date for the draft document from October 31, 2025, to February 28, 2027. The launching of the “timely notice of the referendum” will subsequently need to change from May 1, 2026 to April 2027. The proposed referendum date is July 3, 2027.

“We requested a change to the effective date of the Constitution, from March 31 2027, to January 31 2028,” Mr. Richards added.

According to Mr. Richards, the proposed changes “are intended to ensure an appropriate and thorough engagement of the public prior to submitting a draft constitution.” By granting the delegates additional time, they will be afforded more time to “digest the recommendations or concerns shared by the community during the public engagement process, but more importantly, have an opportunity to act upon the community's contributions.”

The need to distance the referendum from the general election was also addressed. Mr. Richards suggested that it will provide the “opportunity for focusing solely on the draft constitution, while providing a true yardstick that measures the public's interest in the Constitution.”

Despite the extension requests, public engagement is expected to commence by “year’s end.” Doing so will require additional funding. The Convention had received an initial \$200,000 allocation with an extra \$50,000 for the public education and information campaign. The money for that campaign has not yet been received. Mr. Richards stated, however, that he received confirmation from Finance Commissioner Kevin McCurdy that the funds had been authorized before the close of FY2025 and will soon be released.

The funding is needed to “adequately implement the adopted branding and public education plan,” Mr. Richards said. With extensions stretching well into 2027, the Convention believed that an additional \$200,000 will be necessary.

He noted that the Convention has been judicious in its spending and has “run a remarkably lean operation.” This is due in large part to prioritizing virtual meetings and having administrative tasks managed internally at no cost. He warned lawmakers that “this strategy is simply not sustainable for fiscal year 2026.”

Additional funding will allow the convention to hire “much-needed legal counsel to begin our constitutional draft review process” and an “executive director to manage internal and external convention coordination.”

Mr. Richards informed committee chair Senator Milton Potter that the Convention is also “looking for the accommodations in regards to the stipends that are required by law for the delegates.” This will be crucial as inter-island travel becomes more frequent during the public engagement period.

Senator Potter, like several speakers after him, was concerned about a potential “risk of the momentum being lost” by drawing out the process for another year. For Mr. Richards, the important consideration is allowing for more public interaction than was afforded in the five previous iterations of the Convention. Delegate Rudel Hodge Jr. recalled that the fifth draft was submitted to the governor “on the last day.” “There was no true time for the public to really digest and improve on the document,” Mr. Hodge said.

Senator Potter considered it a “very persuasive argument.”

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, on the other hand, was “a little bit concerned about changing the deadline.” Rebutting Mr. Richard’s argument that separating it from the general election would augur well, Senator Francis Heyliger was “very much worried about low voter turnout.”

“Because the Constitution is so important to the people, I really am looking forward to as many people participating in the process,” she stated. She reminded Mr. Richards that it was “part of the strategy” of including the vote in the next election.

For Delegate Imani Daniel, the challenge ahead is instead making the revision process “relevant and timely for the people of the Virgin Islands,” particularly given the current political and economic environment. Ms. Daniel insisted that “we should be pursuing quality over a quantifiable time period.” She considered an extension justifiable to “make sure that our messaging is relevant and not necessarily just fast.”

“If you want us to do it quicker, it will be more expensive,” she noted. Daniel estimates another six months to have the draft prepared and handed over for legal review.

“We’re trying to remove it from being politicized,” added Mr. Richards as further justification for separating the referendum from the 2016 gubernatorial and senatorial elections. He is hesitant about positioning the vote “in the middle of that callaloo.”

Senator Franklin Johnson agreed that it “shouldn’t get crossed up in that.”

“I think that your request for the additional time, as well as the additional funding, makes sense,” said Senator Novelle Francis.

“We understand the mission. We know why the extension is needed and the funding is necessary,” Senator Marvin Blyden added.

The proposed legislation containing the Convention’s request will be voted upon during Thursday’s legislative session. Senator Kurt Vialet has promised that an amendment will be offered “to strike \$200,000 and insert \$300,000.”

“This is a part of our self-governance, and we can’t take it lightly or believe that we could just rush it and it’s going to be done,” Senator Vialet said. “I am hoping that they’re going to be successful, but the very least the Legislature could do is make sure that we give them the tools to work.” The tools in question, it was implied, include the requisite time and money to complete the task.