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Bill Allowing Public Employees to Run for Office Advances Over Bolques' Objection

The Rules Committee voted to advance Bill 36-0134 allowing public employees to run for elective office, despite objections from Sen. Angel Bolques, as lawmakers debated oversight gaps, fairness concerns, and proposed amendments ahead of a full Senate vote

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The debate on a measure to ease restrictions on [public sector workers wishing to seek elective office](#) continued in the Committee on Rules and Judiciary on Thursday. The conversation on the subject became heated at times, just as it was during the initial discussion on the matter.

Last heard in the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection in October 2025, Bill 36-0134, sponsored by Senator Marise James, seeks to allow

government employees to run for political office while actively employed, unless specifically prohibited by federal or other laws. When the measure was last heard, the Division of Personnel was not available for live testimony and thus was invited to do so by Rules committee chair Senator Carla Joseph.

Cindy Richardson, director of the Division of Personnel, told lawmakers that the bill is a “meaningful and necessary step toward ensuring equitable access.” The measure, she said, aligns with DOP’s “obligation to ensure fair, consistent and equitable employment practices across the government service.” According to Ms. Richardson, the bill corrects a framework that has “historically discouraged or prevented employees from seeking elective office due to financial hardship and restrictive leave policies.”

She assured that the Division will “issue guidance to agency heads clarifying permissible and prohibitive political activities during work hours and the appropriate handling of potential conflicts of interest.” The DOP also recommends a communication and training campaign to ensure “uniform understanding among employees and supervisors once enacted.”

Overall, the Division supported the proposed legislation, with Ms. Richardson commenting that it “removes unnecessary barriers to democratic participation, safeguards ethical standards and ensures fair treatment.”

Despite the Division of Personnel’s assurances that implementing Bill 36-0134 would only bode well for public sector employees, several lawmakers remained skeptical. Senator James, who had asked her colleagues to be “transformative in our thinking” was forced to defend her bill on multiple occasions.

Senator Angel Bolques was among the first to voice hesitation, noting several “legislative gaps.” Among them, he said, were questions around oversight. “Who is responsible for monitoring or reporting any investigative violations if an employee uses their work email to send campaign materials. Which agency handles that breach?” he asked. “Shouldn’t the legislature consider codifying some minimum campaign conduct standards into the law?” he added.

There were concerns about rules and regulations, and the occasional recommendation that they be written into law, despite the DOP repeating that issuing such guidance is their responsibility. DOP’s legal counsel, Aaliyah Felix-Blyden, added that various departments already rely on the Division for clarity and support, “so it would be no different.”

Senator Bolques was still not convinced, noting that “there is no clause authorizing or requiring the development of rules, policies, or promulgating of such.”

A desire for more specific regulations was also shared by Senator Carla Joseph, who chose not to vote when the bill was first heard. “I like it to be laid out so that everyone is actually using the same sheet of paper,” added Senator Carla Joseph later on.

Like at the initial hearing, she did not seem to favor the proposal during Thursday’s session. “I’m not trying to pull up any ladder that some people say, but...you have to have that level of sacrifice,” she stated. Senator Joseph was fearful that a supervisor in a public office could use their “influence” to “actually gain support.” Director Richardson dismissed that concern, arguing that “an individual can influence a person anywhere.”

Also on the fence was Senator Milton Potter, who had “mixed feelings about the bill.” Having run three times, Mr. Potter says he understands the rigor of the campaign process. “There’s no way

you can be on a job for the last month and do your work and still be a credible candidate for the Senate,” he stated. His comments preceded an amendment that would require an employee to take leave for the 30 days before the election.

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, who abstained from the vote the first go-around, maintained that campaigning is a time-consuming task. “I don't want the message to go out to the public like we're trying to gatekeep,” she said. She eventually offered the 30-day leave amendment to the bill.

Meanwhile, Senator Hubert Frederick insisted that the bill offers public sector employees an advantage over their counterparts in the private sector. A private sector businessman, he lamented that “my opponent now will have an inherent advantage because they're getting compensated while they're trying to run for the same seat that I'm trying to get.”

He noted that the private sector has over double the number of public sector employees – approximately 25,000. “I don't know if that's fair and equitable... If we incentivize one side more than the other, that's a disadvantage to the other side... if we keep putting most of the benefits on just government employees, then it becomes unfair,” he went on.

Senator Francis maintained that he was not “against government employees getting paid” but did not want to grant them an unfair advantage.

His argument was tossed out by Senator James, who made a brief note that the Government of the Virgin Islands does not provide health insurance for private sector individuals either.

Ultimately, 5 of the 6 lawmakers present on Thursday voted in favor of the bill. That includes Senator Francis Heyliger and Joseph, who initially abstained but ultimately registered “yes” votes. Senator Bolques voted against the bill, stating that he required all promised amendments before a final decision is made. It is expected that Bill 36-0134 will be included on the agenda for Monday's Legislative session.