

Mammogram Funding Bid Collapses as Senators Clash Over Streetlight Bill and Hospital Accountability

Sen. Ray Fonseca's attempt to amend a \$4M streetlight funding bill to purchase a mammography machine for SRMC fell apart after lawmakers denounced the move as procedurally unfair, reigniting concerns over hospital oversight & repeated funding requests.

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Senator Ray Fonseca. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

A promise by Senator Ray Fonseca to offer an amendment to Bill 36-0210 which would authorize the purchase of a mammography machine for the Schneider Regional Medical Center did not come to pass, after several lawmakers expressed their displeasure with his approach.

Bill 36-0210 is an act appropriating the sum of \$4 million from the V.I. Insurance Guaranty Fund to the V.I. Water and Power Authority for the repair, replacement, and operation of streetlights throughout the Territory. It was designated as the bill to which non-germane amendments could be made during Monday's legislative session.

When Bill 36-0210 was first discussed last month, several lawmakers took issue with the proposed funding source and the decision to provide the Water and Power Authority with another injection of funds. Senator Kurt Vialet, the bill's sponsor, insisted that the government had "not paid the required amount to keep street lights on." At that December 15th meeting, Senator Fonseca lamented that other critical needs, including hospitals, remain underfunded.

On Monday, he informed his colleagues that SRMC's mammography machine is "out of service," creating a "backlog of women awaiting routine breast cancer screening." He went on to emphasize the importance of breast cancer screening. It was to that end that Sen. Fonseca requested the "favorable consideration" of the Legislature to reduce the amount of funding designated for WAPA.

"What we're asking here is to give WAPA \$3.5 million and give \$500,000 to purchase this machine. I'm going to be moving an amendment to that," he announced. The amendment did not happen.

Before the vote, several lawmakers denounced such a move. Senator Novelle Francis described it as an "ambush in the night."

Though Sen. Francis agreed that mammography machines are "equally important," he complained that there was "no discussion in terms of utilizing this particular measure for that purpose."

According to Mr. Francis, due diligence was exercised in identifying the money for increased streetlighting, and therefore it is "unfair" for "another senator [to] just come and take the money, just like that, without putting any hard work into it."

Senator Vialet was not pleased either. "It is not something common to have a bill with an appropriation for a specific cause, and somebody bring an amendment for a next cause," he said.

He reminded those listening that when the Legislature appropriated millions to the hospitals in 2025, there were reporting requirements to outline spending and austerity measures. "Schneider have submitted zero reports," he stated. Discussions with the hospitals on those funds are planned. "We need to dig deep because no matter how much we give, the operation is inefficient," Senator Vialet noted.

Senator Marvin Blyden was also interested in answers from SRMC. He pointed to an apparent lack of accountability on the hospital's end. "What about the billing and the hospitals and collections? What are we doing in that respect?" he asked. Like Sen. Francis, he seconded the need for cancer screening but asserted that the overarching issue at hand was "ridiculous."

"We have been put in a corner time and time again," he said. The Legislature, Senator Blyden said, must hold the hospitals accountable "because this can't continue in 2026." He referenced frequent requests for financial support. "The more we give them, the more they're coming back next week. Then what? Every other week something's breaking down?" he wondered.

In a legislative session marked by prolonged recesses, Senator Fonseca's planned amendment never made it to the floor. No further explanation was provided.

Several other non-germane amendments were, however, tacked on to Bill 36-0210. Among them were measures to make small edits to various sections of the Code, like clarification of St. John's status as an island and not a district. Minor amendments to correct entity names in the miscellaneous section of the budget bill were also approved. Another amendment mandates the erection of a permanent structure on the grounds of the Capitol Building on St. Thomas to house an urn with the cremains of Alma B. Ottley, next to those of Earl B. Ottley.

The amended version of the bill will be forwarded to Governor Albert Bryan Jr.

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