

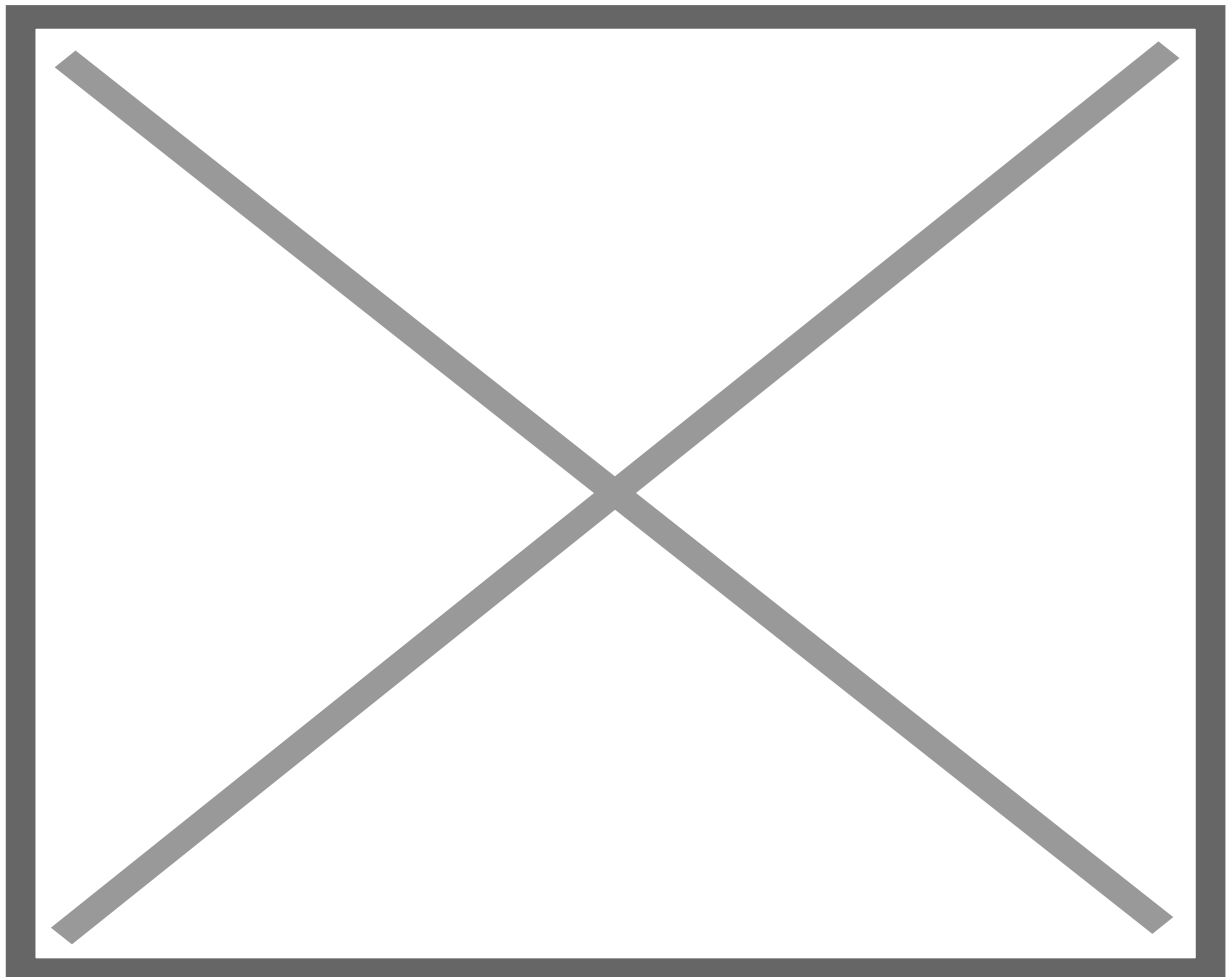
The Virgin Islands Consortium

Property and Procurement Alleges Senators Have Interfered With Rent Collection, Sparking Heated Exchange

During a Senate budget hearing, a senior Property and Procurement official claimed political interference has hindered efforts to collect overdue government rent, drawing sharp denials and calls for transparency from multiple lawmakers.

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Vincent Richards, assistant commissioner of the Department of Property and Procurement, addresses lawmakers during a Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance hearing. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

A contentious exchange unfolded during Tuesday's meeting of the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance after lawmakers raised concerns about the Department of Property and Procurement's failure to collect outstanding rent owed to the Government of the Virgin Islands. When Senator Avery Lewis questioned the lapse in collections, DPP Assistant Commissioner Vincent Richards responded by alleging that political interference—originating from within the Legislature itself—has at times prevented his department from enforcing those obligations.

Richards said the problem is not a lack of authority or awareness within his department, but what he described as outside pressure that has hindered full enforcement.

"I've said it on the floor before during finance hearings. Interference is what stops us from sometimes going the full mile to do what we have to do," he countered. "Many times, a lot of the interference comes from this very building as well, to stop us from doing what we need to do," Mr. Richards told lawmakers.

Senator Lewis appeared visibly frustrated by the assertion. "Nobody in this building should stop the interference of people dealing with their obligations," he responded, making clear that he has never contacted the Department of Property and Procurement with demands related to tenant collections.

Senator Kurt Violet also reacted strongly to Richards' comments, rejecting any suggestion that senators were pressuring the department on behalf of delinquent tenants.

"Don't throw innuendos that this body call you asking you for individuals not to pay. That's total hogwash. Do what you're supposed to do and stop trying to pass a buck," Violet told Richards.

Later in the discussion, however, Violet tempered his remarks, acknowledging that while no interference should occur, the phenomenon Richards described is not unheard of.

"I know that they do receive phone calls, but they need to block it out," Violet said. "No senator should be calling to interfere in the duties of P&P, in the collection of monies owed to this government...What he did say is factual, but it need to stop."

Committee chair Senator Novelle Francis pressed for greater transparency, urging Richards to identify any lawmakers who may have attempted to interfere with the department's duties.

"If there's any senator calling you, then let's point them out," Francis said.

Richards declined to identify any specific individuals.

As a result, it remains unclear whether the identities of lawmakers who may have attempted to influence the Department of Property and Procurement's collection efforts will ever be disclosed to the public.