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## After Two-Term Limit, VIPA Board Nominees Advance on 'Exceptional Service' Vote

Lawmakers weighed whether Willard John, Leona Smith and Celestino White Sr. merited an exception under law, with Senator Kenneth Gittens dissenting and raising concerns over airport redevelopment and St. Croix projects.

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From left to right, Leona Smith, Willard John, and Celestino White Sr. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

Members of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary were tasked with determining whether three nominees for the V.I. Port Authority Governing Board had rendered "exceptional service" to the agency.

All three individuals have already reached the two-term limit prescribed by local law. However, the Legislature can make an exception based on a determination that the nominee has provided exceptional service. As committee chair Senator Carla Joseph pointed out, this is a term that the Code fails to define.

Therefore, Celestino White Sr, Willard John, and Leona Smith were at the mercy of the committee during Thursday's meeting.

First up was Willard John, re-elected just this week as the board's current chair. He reminded the committee of his experience as an educator and culture bearer, as well as his connections to the tourism industry. "I bring extensive experience and cultural knowledge to the board. This expertise can help develop policies and initiatives to enhance the travel and tourism sector in our territory," he testified. "As a board member, I help establish policies for the Port Authority's aviation and Marine divisions, as well as its operations and financial policies," he added.

Mr. John spent much of his testimony providing updates on VIPA's capital projects on St. Croix. Leona Smith, meanwhile, spoke of updates relevant to St. John.

She outlined her experience as a former St. John administrator and her time on several boards including that of the Government Employees' Retirement System. Ms. Smith currently serves as the Assistant Director of Festivals for St. John at the Department of Tourism.

"As a former board member and an active participant in the travel and tourism industry, I believe my experience will enable me to contribute effectively to the board and continue this progressive work," she stated.

Meanwhile, former Senator Celestino White Sr. provided an overview of his contributions to public service. He noted that he is "proud to hold a master's degree in common sense and a PhD in street sense, from the school of hard knocks."

Lawmakers attempted to use their question time to determine whether exceptional service had been rendered. Some, like Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, asked the nominees to share their biggest accomplishments and visions as individual board members.

Others, like Senator Marvin Blyden, noted that there is "no question" about their qualifications. He commended them for their willingness to serve. However, Senator Blyden found it difficult to believe that "no one is applying to be on such an important board." He stated that he was "disappointed."

Senator Clifford Joseph wondered whether the vacancies on the board were brought to the attention of the governor. Mr. White replied in the affirmative. He told Sen. Joseph that "what makes the board exceptional is those that we have, go to work every day."

Based on the nominees' responses to the questions posed, most lawmakers seemed satisfied that their service provided was exceptional and that they could continue for one more term.

Senator Kenneth Gittens, however, felt markedly different. "But as I sit here today and listen to everything, I am not convinced," he admitted.

He took issue with the breadth of responses to questions about the public-private-partnership between VIPA and Sky City for the redevelopment of the airports. The nominees repeatedly stated that negotiations are ongoing and are expected to be completed by the year's end.

Gittens also lamented a lack of development on St. Croix, when compared to VIPA's efforts on St. Thomas. "We talking one port, one VI. So why we can't get nothing to replace the belt on St. Croix?" he asked.

He addressed former Senator Celestino White directly, thanking him for his years of service, but noted that "at some point I wanted you to just bow out or retire gracefully."

"Longevity has its place," was Mr. White's reply.

Still, Sen. Gittens warned that "my vote today is going to be...I really am not moved."

Senator Francis Heyliger voiced her disagreement. "While I do support his concern for several things and we need to fix them, I wouldn't say that they're not doing a good enough job."

Ultimately, all three nominees received the requisite number of votes needed to move forward favorably. As promised, Sen. Gittens voted no, while Senator Clifford Joseph abstained from all three votes.