

Vialet Calls for Stronger Vetting of Commissioners and Directors Under Next Administration

The Senate majority leader says future nominees should be questioned more rigorously and judged on their plans, creativity and ability to lead agencies through major infrastructure, education and healthcare decisions.

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Senator Kurt Vialet. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

Senator Kurt Vialet says the next Legislature should take a far more rigorous approach to confirming commissioners and directors chosen by the next governor after the election, arguing that the Virgin Islands can no longer afford a process in which Cabinet nominees are approved largely to help a new administration get started.

Speaking during a V.I. Consortium interview Monday night, Mr. Vialet said one of the first responsibilities facing the next Senate will be evaluating the commissioners and directors selected by the next governor to lead government departments and agencies. He said that process must change significantly from what he described as the traditional practice of allowing governors wide latitude to establish their Cabinets.

“A lot of times when you’re in the Senate, you give the benefit of the doubt to the governor,” Mr. Vialet said. “So whoever they send down for commissioner, you usually say, ‘Well, I’m going to approve those individuals because I’m going to work with the governor to give them a chance to establish a cabinet.’”

Mr. Vialet said that approach has led to regrets among lawmakers, who later recognize that some confirmations were not in the best interest of the territory.

“Every single member of the Senate will more than likely say, ‘Now that that was a bad decision here, that was a bad decision there,’” he said.

The Senate majority leader said the next Legislature must stop treating Cabinet confirmations as a courtesy extended to the executive branch. Instead, he said senators should examine whether nominees are capable of producing real improvements within the agencies they are selected to lead.

“We now say, ‘No, we’re going to fully vet these individuals, and if we really feel that these individuals aren’t going to do good for the position, we’re going to recommend that you send somebody else down,’” Mr. Vialet said.

He said the territory needs agency leaders who are prepared to do more than manage departments in the usual way. The next group of commissioners and directors, he said, must show that they can bring new ideas and measurable progress to government operations.

“We need individuals in every single department who are going to be transformational, who’s going to be creative, who’s going to do stuff that is new,” Mr. Vialet said. “And we have to make sure that they’re going to prove that to us and let us know what their plans are.”

Asked whether the vetting process would become more rigorous, Mr. Vialet said, “Ten times more rigorous.”

He also said he intends to exert influence before nominees are formally transmitted to the Senate. Mr. Vialet said he has relationships with several gubernatorial candidates, including those considered frontrunners, and expects to have direct conversations with whoever is elected about the type of leadership needed in the territory’s departments and agencies.

“I plan to exert influence even before they’re sent down,” he said.

Mr. Vialet linked the issue to the next administration’s responsibility for managing major public priorities, including federal recovery projects, infrastructure, education and healthcare. He said the Virgin Islands has a limited period to move critical projects from planning to implementation, and the quality of executive branch leadership will matter.

“We no longer could wait,” he said. “We have a small window of time to shape stuff to make sure that the Virgin Islands move forward.”

Mr. Vialet said that window includes the spending and management of remaining federal recovery dollars, which he estimated at \$16 billion to \$18 billion. He said the next four years will be critical for ensuring that projects are fully underway, and in some cases completed, by 2030. The federal deadline, according to the Office of Disaster Recovery, is 2025.

He said the territory must use that period to transform infrastructure, schools and healthcare, but argued that such work depends heavily on the competence of those appointed to lead departments.

Mr. Vialet said the next Senate must recognize its role in shaping the direction of the government, including through the confirmation process. He said senators should not hesitate to reject Cabinet nominees they believe are not equipped for the job.

He said the Cabinet confirmation process is not separate from the broader issues facing the territory. Leadership decisions made early in the next administration will influence whether the Virgin Islands can move major projects forward, improve public services and address longstanding problems inside government agencies, the veteran lawmaker stated.

Mr. Vialet said that is one of the reasons he chose to seek reelection rather than pursue the governorship this cycle. He argued that experienced lawmakers will be needed to scrutinize nominees, question executive branch decisions and ensure that St. Croix and the wider territory are properly represented. "I wanted to make sure that I am at the table," Mr. Vialet said.