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Lieutenant Governor Debate Presses Potter on Lack of Epstein Hearings, Francis on Compensation Report and Moorhead on School Leadership

Candidates for lieutenant governor faced detailed questions on banking and health insurance, while moderators pressed Milton Potter on Epstein hearings, Novelle Francis on the Compensation Commission report and Rodney Moorhead on local school conditions.

Election / **Published On July 20, 2026 05:55 AM /**

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From left to right, Senator Novelle Francis Jr., Milton Potter, and Rodney Moorhead. By. WTJX.

Candidates vying for the Democratic nomination as Lieutenant Governor faced tough, policy-based questions during Sunday night's debate hosted by the Virgin Islands Consortium and

WTJX. From the beginning, Rodney Moorehead and Senators Milton Potter and Novelle Francis were asked to put meat on the bones of their various pledges and promises to the people of the Virgin Islands.

The hour-long debate began with the topic of banking. Here, moderators Ernice Gilbert and Marcellina Ventura-Douglas pressed participants to provide details on what they could do as Lieutenant Governor to increase the provision of banking services in the territory. Senator Francis cautioned against the perception of conflicts of interest within the Lt. Governor's office, whose Division of Banking and Insurance holds a regulatory role over the industry. Both he and Mr. Moorehead suggested that the banking board needs to be empowered, with adequate staff and otherwise, to perform the important role of attracting additional banking business to the territory. Moderators also extracted a promise from all three candidates to strengthen the Community Reinvestment Act by requiring island-by-island lending scores to be made available to the public, so that lending activity in St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John can be measured more actively.

Individual questions came next. Senator Milton Potter, who is sharing an electoral ticket with current Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett, told moderators that his colleagues in the legislature decided not to hold any local hearings on the activities of Jeffrey Epstein. "In a collaborative spirit, we decided that there was nothing constructive to be gained in going down that road of opening big Jeffrey Epstein hearings in the territory," said the sitting President of the Senate. "In speaking with individual members, it was clear that that was not something that we were prepared to do at this time."

Senator Francis seemed surprised at this take, saying that he certainly was not one of the legislators who was queried by Senator Potter. "I know several of the majority members that were interested in having a hearing and...vet this very same Epstein issue in broad daylight." There was even a draft bill to that effect "that was circulating and should have come to the floor," said Senator Francis.

Moderators pointed out that inquiries and hearings have been convened in the United States, UK, France, and several other European countries, as well as an EU-wide anti-fraud investigation and probed Senator Potter further about why legislators in the Virgin Islands did not seem to think that a local inquiry in the very place much of Epstein's crimes were said to occur was a priority. Senator Potter pointed out the lawsuit against the Epstein estate that was brought by the Virgin Islands Department of Justice, but moderators reminded him that local officials who facilitated or were connected to Mr. Epstein in various ways have not yet faced any scrutiny. While Senator Francis expressed hope that an investigative hearing will still be convened before the tenure of the 36th Legislature comes to an end, Mr. Potter demurred on that issue, suggesting that VIDOJ should spearhead any investigation of that nature.

Next, Mr. Moorehead faced probing questions about his fitness for leadership, given his tenure as principal of the St. Croix Educational Complex. Accused of remaining largely silent as students and staff battled heat, mold, and other unsafe conditions over the last few years, Mr. Moorehead pointed to his long tenure of service, including the successful awarding of grants and other national accolades. He claimed to have advocated on behalf of his school to receive air conditioning units, but blamed maintenance officials for the contract that reportedly resulted in the shoddy installation of commercial fans on campus, one of which [fell and seriously injured a student](#). "That is not the job of the principal," Mr. Moorehead said. Moderators pushed back, questioning his lack of public visibility during the school's recent challenges. "During the protests of heat, various issues at the school, you were not seen. Why should we believe that after this campaign is over, you will be visible?" asked Mr. Gilbert.

“I was outside,” Mr. Moorehead insisted, arguing that he was both visible and vocal to those who mattered; parents and education officials. “I’m going to use the proper necessary tools to correct situations,” he said.

Senator Francis was next to be grilled by moderators, who asked why during his tenure as President of the 35th Legislature, he denied receiving a report from the Compensation Commission. Email records later showed that he had in fact received the report in a timely manner. At the time, Senator Francis claimed that he may have been “set up”, and moderators wondered if he had taken any actions to substantiate that claim. The lawmaker deflected the question by first taking “full responsibility” for his actions as Senate president before suggesting that the report was submitted in an unusual way. “To send an email and not to send a hard copy or be able to validate that an email was received is not what the norm is in government,” Senator Francis declared. Pressed on the facts, Senator Francis insisted that he had not received the email, and promised to release IT records and logs to prove that he was telling the truth.

Moderators returned to a group question, asking candidates about whether they plan to again deliver comprehensive individual health insurance to residents in the territory. Senator Francis spoke to the importance of having the government subsidize insurance coverage to make costs workable for both insurers and residents. He also suggested exploring the merging of private and public sector insurance pools, or even including residents of the British Virgin Islands to increase volume, efficiencies, and ultimately costs. For the Roach-Francis ticket, exploring these opportunities is “something that we intend to undertake in our first 100 days in office,” Senator Francis said.

Senator Potter also vowed to work on delivering individual health insurance for Virgin Islanders, and agreed that subsidies would be needed, proposing that the funding be raised from the \$140 million in currently uncollected property taxes. “I don’t want to give the impression that this is something we can do in 100 days, but will certainly start the process,” he advised.

While Mr. Moorehead did not offer any concrete proposals for funding, he agreed that this was a priority for the people of the Virgin Islands. “We need to have that health insurance and it must be subsidized,” he said.

The tightly-moderated debate concluded with each candidate promising that their ticket was focused on collaboration between the Governor and Lieutenant Governor’s office, so that the Lieutenant Governor had the scope to offer input on executive branch decisions. With that, the baton was handed off to the gubernatorial hopefuls, whose Consortium/WTJX primary debate will be aired on Monday evening, beginning at 8 p.m.