

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Election System Cites Inflation in Push for \$2.79M Budget as Low Voter Turnout Persists and Constitution Vote Could Cost \$300K

ESVI is seeking \$2.79 million for FY 2027, \$292,200 above OMB's approved level, citing inflation, healthcare, cybersecurity and election obligations. Lawmakers questioned costs, voter participation, rent costs and a possible \$300,000 constitutional vote.

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Supervisor of Elections Caroline Fawkes greets Sens. Marvin Blyden, center, and Novelle Francis during the Election System's FY 2027 budget hearing before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

The Election System of the Virgin Islands is seeking \$2,792,200 for fiscal year 2027, \$292,200 more than the \$2.5 million approved by the Office of Management and Budget, with election officials citing rising costs, cybersecurity, technology services and federal requirements as lawmakers questioned whether additional spending is producing sufficient gains in voter participation.

Supervisor of Elections Caroline Fawkes told the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance that the increase “is not discretionary.” Rather, she said, it is “driven by essential needs”, including higher healthcare costs, required technology services, professional services, cybersecurity, post-election compliance and “federally mandated activities.”

Fawkes said the additional funding is necessary to maintain operational continuity, protect election integrity, retain a qualified workforce, strengthen voter engagement and participation, and provide equitable service throughout the territory. She also warned that inadequate funding could gradually erode confidence in the electoral process.

ESVI Says Budget Has Remained Nearly Flat Since 2019

According to Fawkes, ESVI’s budget has “remained essentially unchanged since 2019, despite cumulative inflation exceeding 25 percent over the same period.” As a result, she said, the System’s “purchasing power has declined significantly.”

Fawkes told lawmakers that “prolonged funding stagnation has increased pressure on staffing, program delivery, and operational capacity,” while also “limiting ability to expand services, address growing community needs, and respond to emerging demands.”

The Supervisor of Elections also presented the Board of Elections’ \$310,000 budget, which supports “governance and oversight.” Sixty-six percent of that spending plan is dedicated to supplies, capital outlay and other services.

Transportation is among the Board’s needs. Fawkes testified that the Board requires “dependable transportation resources”, noting that a replacement van for the St. Thomas/St. John District could cost “over \$70,000.” The existing vehicle, which is used to transport voting machines for demonstrations, has engine problems and is “not repairable.”

Frederick Questions Cost of Growth and Technology

Sen. Hubert Frederick challenged the cost of ESVI’s plans for growth, innovation and technological advancement, saying the effort “comes at an extreme cost.” He questioned whether the “marginal increase that we’re seeing with the voters participating is worth the cost that we’re spending.”

Frederick argued that ESVI should find ways to accomplish its objectives “but at a better value to the taxpayers because the government is broke.” After consecutive budget hearings in which agencies sought additional funding, he added that “everyone that comes in here, no exception, assumes that we have this extra money hiding to give to them.”

Fawkes pushed back on that assessment, telling the committee that “democracy is a service...Without democracy, there won't be a legislative body.” She maintained that “whether you're providing for one voter or 56,000 voters, you have to be prepared for the expansion.”

Frederick remained unconvinced and pointed specifically to ESVI's St. Croix rental costs, which total approximately \$18,692 per month. He suggested that the money spent on rent could instead have been used toward constructing a permanent facility for the Election System.

“Everyone needs to start considering alternative means to save the government money because we truly don't have it,” Sen. Frederick stated.

Board Chairman Says Participation Must Improve

Board of Elections Chairman Raymond Williams focused on the need to strengthen voter engagement and participation, particularly in primary elections. He questioned the value of funding the process if voters do not participate.

“It is a waste of money. Simple to fund the primary if we're not coming out to participate in the process,” he said.

The exchange placed voter education and participation alongside the broader question of whether ESVI's requested increase is justified, as lawmakers weighed the agency's operational needs against the government's financial constraints.

Potential Constitution Vote Could Cost \$300,000

Sen. Kurt Vialet also asked whether a cost had been attached to a potential 2027 vote on the Constitution.

Fawkes said the ultimate decision on funding rests with the Office of Management and Budget, but estimated that such a vote could cost approximately \$300,000. Williams said he would discuss the matter with the Board.

The potential constitutional vote would come as ESVI seeks \$2.792 million for its regular FY 2027 operations, arguing that years of largely stagnant funding and higher costs have weakened its purchasing power while lawmakers continue pressing the agency to demonstrate that its spending, technology investments and voter outreach are delivering sufficient value.