

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At Board of Elections Meeting: Early Voting, Ballot Issues And A Bus

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At a lengthy Board of Elections meeting on Wednesday in St. Croix, Board members and staff discussed a myriad of issues, ranging from the installation of working cameras and budget allocation, to the ordering of sample ballots, advertising in local media, and seemingly out of nowhere, the question of who is legally authorized to drive the Board of Elections bus.

Elections Supervisor Caroline Fawkes said election-related equipment had been ordered--including Sip and Puff, a device that allows the sending of signals by using air pressure through "sipping" or "puffing" on a straw, tube or "wand." It is primarily used by people who do not have the use of their hands.

Ballot boxes were also ordered and should arrive by the end of October, Fawkes said. She noted that "it's going to be close" and that a "Plan B needs to be in place," adding that the vendors were working "as quickly as possible" to have the boxes ready before Election Day.

Fawkes went on to say her Plan B solution is to employ the ES&S company based in St. Thomas to produce the ballot boxes. Soon, there was a brief back-and-forth about the approval of ballots, but it was quickly resolved without much debate.

Fawkes also reported that cameras used to monitor activity following voting were ordered from a company named Blockbuster, as cameras at the Board of Elections offices in the Sunny Isle Annex no longer work. Board Chairman Adelbert Bryan was concerned about the cameras not being ready on time and posed the question to Fawkes; however, Fawkes could not give a definite answer, as the camera she recently ordered from Blockbuster arrived in St. Croix disfigured and was sent back to Blockbuster for repairs. There was no mention of when the camera would be returned to St. Croix, as the defective camera was a used one Blockbuster no longer manufactured.

Note: As per federal law, cameras are not recommended in places where people are voting; however, they are important to monitor activity once voting is complete.

At one point, board member Lilliana Belardo de O'Neal voiced her concern that election-related advertisements coming from the St. Croix District are not being translated into Spanish, as mandated by law. Belardo de O'Neal acknowledged that while she has heard English-language ads on local radio, she had not heard any Spanish-language ads, something she demanded be corrected. Deputy Supervisor of Elections Genevieve Whitaker quickly chimed in to inform the former senator that Spanish-language ads are being played on two local radio stations on a contractual basis.

As for a budget, Fawkes requested \$420,000, but as it stands now, a total of \$1.4 million has been allocated for the Office of the Supervisor, with \$80,000 being set aside for each board.

Early Voting

A tentative early-voting date has been set for Oct. 16, in both the St. Croix and St. Thomas-St. John Districts, and according to St. Croix board members, while various meeting dates had been set with the Joint Boards to ratify the process, the constant changes by the St. Thomas District Board left St. Croix officials frustrated, a sentiment echoed unanimously at yesterday's meeting.

Joint Boards meetings were set for October 7, then October 8, and then St. Thomas reneged again. St. Croix District Board members wondered why St. Thomas always seemed to have the last say, but Bryan countered, saying it was up to the St. Croix board members to put their feet down. "We're being bullied," board member Roland Moolenar said.

The Elections Board audit report still has not been given a release date, and it was made known that the report was tied to a jump drive with related information. When it was revealed the administrative assistant was the sole person with access to the jump drive, a motion was made to transfer control of the jump drive from the administrative assistant

to Fawkes.

Fawkes offered that 2,000 sample ballots be ordered -- they are being printed by property and procurement. Board member Rupert Ross, however, advised Fawkes to first check with VI Code to ensure the amount she orders will be inline with the law.

The board's lease with Sunny Isle was also discussed, and Fawkes said options were being weighed and that the best deal will be chosen, as Sunny Isle is being flexible with the board, a longtime tenant. The lease expired in September and Sunny Isle wants \$22 per square foot; the cost had been \$20 for the past five years. The new amount would add an extra \$750 a month to the board's monthly rent.

Then without warning, Ross brought up the issue of the election van, stating that, the way he understands it, only government employees are legally allowed to drive the 15-passenger vehicle. Ross went on to say that board members are prohibited from operating the vehicle because they are not employed by the government. Bryan, who operates the vehicle on occasion, fired back, demanding to see where it states clearly that only government employees should drive the van.

The back-and-forth on the matter went on for a bit, but afterward other issues were discussed. Overall, the meeting saw a lot of topics being discussed, ideas being brought to the fore and members being brought up-to-date with the Supervisor of Election's efforts.