

# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## Community Members Question Candidates At Town Hall Meeting

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Although the crowd was light at St. Croix's first political town hall meeting, candidates running for office fielded a wide array of heavy questions from attendees on topics ranging from plans to revitalize the mental health system in the territory to solutions on combating government corruption, as well as ways to improve the education system for the island's youth.

The event took place on Tuesday night at the St. Croix Educational Complex and was organized by local personality and community activist, Darren "Bogle" Stevens, along with Troy Mason, former Democratic senatorial candidate.

The first question came from a local defense attorney who asked candidates what



mental health system in the Virgin Islands. The panelist said that "it's one of the issues that health illnesses end up committing crimes"

Audience members at Tuesday night's

Town Hall meeting at Educational Complex.

In his response to her question, candidate for the office of lieutenant governor, John Canegata, representing gubernatorial candidate, Soraya Diase-Coffelt, said that navigating people away from a life of crime doesn't start when they are adults.

"The problem starts early in school when children possibly have special ed issues and we're not addressing them, and they just keep being promoted on," Canegata said. "We need to address it early in school."

Another audience member asked panelists what qualifications they have "to make decisions for us."

To that question, all of the candidates listed off a litany of college degrees, certifications and previous employment experience that they believed qualified them to sit as lawmakers or governor/lieutenant governor in the Virgin Islands. One incumbent candidate even pointed out that the voters who voted him into office qualified his candidacy.

Without any prompting by audience members, Sen. Diane Capehart made a move to "clear up" the reason why she initially voted in favor of the unpopular "streetlights bill," which received strong reaction from the community. The bill sought to allow WAPA to charge private homeowners a fee to pay for the operation of public streetlights.

Capehart called her decision "the lesser of other evils," stating that the Senate was faced with implementing several other costly measures in order to fund budget deficits.

However, one audience member rejected Capehart's explanation, stating that he is tired of hearing about things being "the lesser of evils" as the only way to solve financial issues. With that, he told the freshman senator he would not be voting for her.

Several audience members questioned candidates about their plans for improving the Territory's education system, particularly for students on St. Croix. Democrat Malcolm McGregor proposed extending the school day in order to cater to the different learning styles of students. Independent candidate, Dwight Nicholson said he wants to see sports and other extracurricular activities return to the island's schools. And,

On the issue of corruption, Canegata shared the legal battle he and Coffelt endured in order to make it on to the General Election ballot. Early in their campaign, other candidates sought to remove them from the ballot due to them belonging to different political parties--Coffelt is an Independent candidate, while Canegata is Republican. He said both he and Coffelt have waged war against government corruption and that "we know it because we have felt it."

Democrat Arthur A. Joseph said that as a law enforcement officer, he is not afraid of enforcing the law against those who break it, stating that he has no problem arresting "friend or foe." He also gave an impassioned appeal to fathers, stating that much of the community's ills can be traced back to the lack of fathers being actively involved in the lives of their children.

"Men, take care of your children," he pleaded.

Stevens said he organized the event because he had grown weary of viewing televised political forums and observing that many of the issues he felt were important to the community were not being addressed. He said the town hall was the community's opportunity to pose their questions directly to candidates and get answers.

"I'm not going to do this just tonight," Stevens said. "If God spares my life, I want to do this every six months where the candidates will come and display their platform and meet with the people. And, if you meet with the people and explain where you are with the goals you had set [while campaigning], when it comes election time, you won't have to hurt your head too much."

While all candidates running for political office were invited to participate, only eight showed up, including: Linus Louis Lacane, Independent; Terrance "Positive" Nelson, IMC; Malcolm McGregor, Democrat; Diane Capehart, Democrat; Arthur A. Joseph, IMC; Miguel Quinones, Jr., Independent; Jamila Russel, Independent; and Dwight Nicholson, Independent.

There was about 100 audience members in attendance.

