

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Elections System Employee Say Machines Good, Police Called To Joint Boards Meeting

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St. Thomas -- The Joint Boards of Elections met in St. Thomas Thursday morning at the Elections System Office with the intent to discuss various election-related topics just five days before the November 4 General Election. However, just moments into the first agenda item, the meeting took a nosedive and never fully recovered.

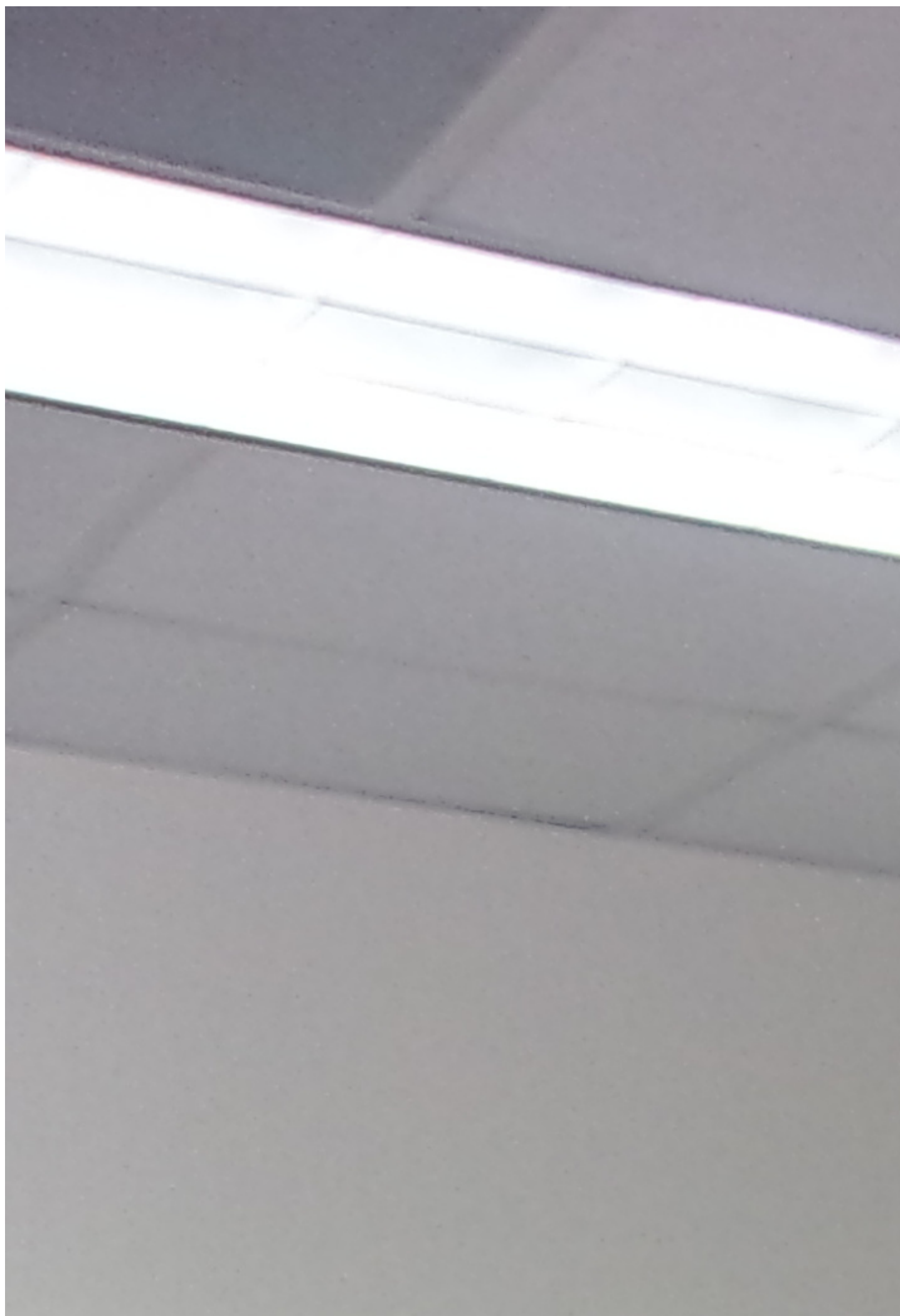
Dr. Tonija Coverdale, election technology territorial coordinator of the Elections System of the Virgin Islands, was placed on the agenda to give a brief explanation of how the DS200 machines work. In her presentation, Dr. Coverdale said the machines were not actually dysfunctional, rather, the manner in which they were programmed is what was causing the "over-voting" or "under-voting" problems, she pointed out.

Certain Board members took exception to Dr. Coverdale's explanation and member Raymond Williams made a motion to have her removed from the meeting. Testy exchanges ensued between Dr. Coverdale, some Board members, and Assistant Attorney General Kimberly Salisbury, who was representing the Board.

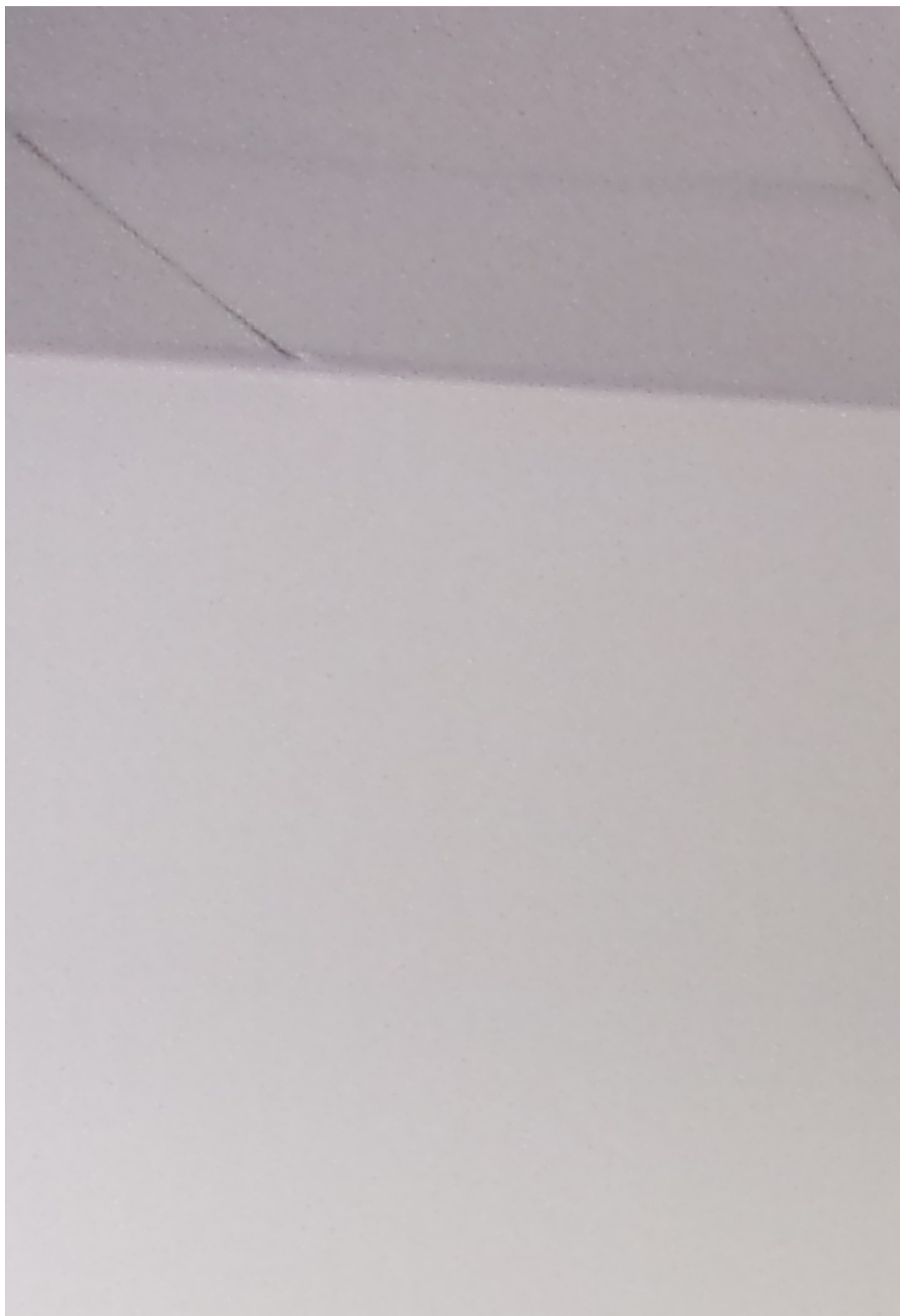
Dr. Coverdale demanded she be respected, an action that gained the applause of members of the St. Thomas community who were present at the meeting. Dr. Coverdale then exited the room visibly upset.

From there, the room erupted with emotions flaring back and forth between Board members, most of whom disagreed with Dr. Coverdale's presentation, as she said the machines are suitable to be used on Election Day and the that current version of the DS200 machine is being used in 14 states. Some members challenged Dr. Coverdale's reasoning, contending that Virgin Islands law is different from those states. This reporter observed multiple Board members discreetly telling Elections Supervisor Caroline Fawkes that the Board would no longer require the services of Dr. Coverdale and asked that she be terminated.

Meanwhile, the audience's frustrations with the ongoing confusion surrounding the election boiled over. Joint Boards Chairwoman Alecia Wells motioned to hold an executive session in an effort to clear the room, as members of the community are not allowed in executive board meetings.































However, almost two hours later, the crowd was still in the room, now with police officers present who were trying to keep the peace and attempting to get them to temporarily exit the conference room. During that time, Board members bickered--Williams and Wilma Marsh Monsanto got into a bit of a squabble, with Williams unleashing a string of obscenities at Monsanto. "I will not leave!" a person in the audience shouted, with others soon joining in.

Eventually, after much convincing, everyone exited the room, leaving Board members to convene their executive session, which lasted for at least an hour. Then, at about 2:15 p.m., members of the community and media rejoined the Joint Boards meeting.

Member Roland Moolenaar spoke to this reporter and requested he test the DS200 machine for himself, so he could witness the problem firsthand and dissipate any notion that something dubious was happening within the Board of Elections. However, before Moolenaar could make his motion, he was upstaged by Board member Arturo Watlington Jr., who moved that the media and community members test the machines themselves. Strangely enough, though, before the motion was even called, Watlington held up four fingers to Williams, which appeared to be him asking for support on his motion to test only four ballots for errors.

Member Adelbert Bryan opposed and offered an amendment to the motion that Watlington should include more than four ballots. However, Bryan's amendment was shut down and only four ballots were agreed upon. In the end, however, about five ballots were tested.

Firsthand Account Using DS200 Voting Machine

The DS200 voting machines, according to some Board members, are not working as they should when it comes to symbol voting. Symbol voting--also known as Straight Party voting--occurs when a voter selects a party symbol and all candidates in the party will automatically receive a vote. For instance, if a voter selects the donkey symbol, representative of the Democratic party, the voter would have automatically voted for Stacy Plaskett for Congress, Donna M. Christensen for Governor and all the Democratic candidates for Senate.

But, if after choosing the donkey symbol on the paper ballot, the voter proceeded to vote for a candidate of a different party, when the ballot is fed into the machine, it would not recognize any of the Democratic candidates that were selected on the ballot, but would instead register a vote only for the non-Democratic candidate that was selected. The problem with that is, Board members say, the machine accepts the ballot as valid, leading the voter to believe his or her vote was entered correctly. If the machine is working correctly, according to Board members, that ballot should reflect an error when fed into the machine.

It should be noted that, when symbol voting, the only category that will be unknowingly spoiled is the category the voter selected as his or her party of choice. For example, if a voter symbol votes using the Democratic symbol -- the donkey -- and then selects the Independent Mapp-Potter team for Governor, only gubernatorial Democratic team Christensen-Ottley will lose its vote. Votes for the Democratic Senate candidates will not

be affected.

The same goes for any symbol-voting scenario: choose Republican and vote for candidates outside of the Republican Party and the same thing happens.

The issues outlined above were experienced by this reporter when conducting a test of five ballots using the DS200 voting machine.

But Dr. Coverdale, in a resignation letter obtained by *VI Consortium* late Thursday night, says the Board has created "exception (error) situations and once the errors are received, which should actually occur in these situations, proceed to raise additional 'concerns' regarding the proper operation of the machines when in fact, the errors received are an indication that they are indeed working properly."

It appeared strange to this reporter that Watlington kept motioning to Williams that they should allow no more than four ballots to be tested by the public and media, and although Bryan protested, all of the St. Thomas Board members, except Monsanto, voted to use no more than four ballots for testing. From St. Croix, Williams, Lisa Harris-Moorhead, Rupert Ross, Jr. and Liliana Belardo de O'Neal also voted to use only four ballots. Monsanto from St. Thomas, Moolenaar, Glen Webster and Bryan from St. Croix voted to use more than four ballots.

After the ballot testing was completed, Moolenaar attempted to explain to community members and media what had just taken place, and tried to use those who had tested the machine themselves to give testimony. However, he was repeatedly interrupted.

Board members next entered into a brief discussion on the ballot issues, and how vote-counting would be handled on election night. It was not clear what method the Board will ultimately use; however, Board member Ross told the *VI Consortium* the preferred method is the process now being exercised during early voting, which ends on St. Thomas on Oct. 31, where residents vote, but their ballots are not placed into the DS200 tabulator. Instead, the ballots will be collected by judges, who will then determine what needs to be placed into the tabulator, Ross said, and what will remain out of it to be hand-counted by Board members and judges.

In the United States an election judge (called an elections inspector, elections officer or poll worker in some U.S. states) is an official responsible for the proper and orderly voting in local precincts. Depending on the state, election judges may be identified as members of a political party or non-partisan.

The Board briefly touched on Alicia "Chucky" Hansen's name being on the ballot, and Fawkes assured that, pursuant to the Supreme Court's Oct. 24 ruling, she had removed Hansen's name from the ballot. ES&S also confirmed the new ballots were ready.

Discussions about Hansen now launching a write-in campaign were briefly raised, topics included what variations of her name, if any, will be accepted. The Board did not finalize that. When Board member Webster sought clarification on the 15-day period in which a person must file in order to wage a write-in effort, Salisbury said the law is void because nothing can stop anyone from mounting a write-in campaign. She also said that such a law mandates an update every five years, and it is long past that time since V.I. elections law was updated to reflect current statutes.

With much more left on the agenda to be discussed and rectified, St. Croix Board member de O'Neal said she could not stay because she had to attend church and Ross also left, citing prior engagements on St. Croix.

With de O'Neal and Ross' departure (Moolenaar and Williams had already left), quorum was broken at 3:50 p.m., rendering the remaining members of the Joint Boards unable to vote on other agenda items. The Board is not set to meet again until Dec. 1.

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