

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Rules Committee Approves Carlos Robles For Agriculture Department

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The Committee on Rules and Judiciary, chaired by Sen. Kenneth Gittens, Friday approved the nomination of Carlos Robles, Commissioner-designee of the Department of Agriculture in a session at the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall in St. Thomas.

The nomination, which passed with a vote of six yes and one absent, will be forwarded to the full body for further consideration.

"I think a lot of individuals are not quite clear on what a farmer really is and the fact that a farmer is really a professional," said committee member, Sen. Jean Forde. "A farmer is a businessman, a farmer is one who produces and sells his product. It's a

business that you're running for profit."

In his opening remarks, Robles stated what he is calling his "driving force" behind his leadership of the agriculture department.

"I really believe that we can get more food on our plates," he said. "That will be my driving force."

During his exchange with lawmakers, the commissioner-designee said that in addition to sharing more information about agriculture with the public, he would also be working with a range of agencies and experts while seeking supplemental funding for the department. He said the department's budget of approximately \$3 million for the current fiscal year would require much more -- \$25 million, to be exact -- in order to meet the territory's needs. Robles further pointed out that the Agriculture Department is severely understaffed, operating without administrative personnel, engineers, grant writers and other essential staff.

Committee members asked Robles how he would help local farming businesses expand in order to accommodate Virgin Islanders who live outside the territory wanting access to local goods. Robles said although he hoped it would be possible in the future, the department's current limited resources would not afford something like that at this time.

"We can't meet the local demand for local food," Robles said.

Sen. Marvin Blyden, a non-committee member, suggested that officials look into creating an office specifically for experienced grant writers to ensure access to federal funds that are untapped or lost too often in the territory.

"We are losing hundreds of millions of dollars in grants. It is clear that OMB does their job, yes, but at the same time, it is not enough and we must do things differently," Blyden said.

Committee members present included Sens. Neville James, Novelle Francis, Jean Forde, Justin Harrigan, Nereida Rivera O'Reilly and Kenneth Gittens. Sen. Kurt Vialet was absent. Non-committee members present included, Sens. Marvin Blyden, Myron D. Jackson and Tregenza A. Roach.

Feature Image: L to R - Sen. Kenneth Gittens greets newly approved Agriculture Commissioner Carlos Robles.