The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senate Tears Into Griffith At Hearing, Says JFL Spending Like 'Drunken Sailors'

Health / **Published On February 25, 2015 11:07 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert February 25, 2015

> But right now I believe that we're spending like a bunch of drunken sailors; why is this? And that's why I say, poor decisions are just overshadowing the good. -- *Sen. Kenneth Gittens*

Members of the Senate's Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services, chaired by Sen. Kurt Vialet, grilled Juan F. Luis Hospital (JFL) officials Tuesday, particularly its CEO, Kendall Griffith, on pay raises the hospital gave to some employees during a time when it could barely make payroll. The senators also chided the JFL leadership for giving retroactive pay around the same time, and questioned their decision to not wait until the hospital was making a profit before making those moves.

As is custom, the senators allowed JFL officials to testify on the current condition of the hospital, giving a breakdown of the strides already made and challenges currently being faced. This is necessary as the Senate makes decisions on appropriating funds to help the hospital stay afloat, and is responsible for appropriate millions every year as part of the GVI's annual budget.

Griffith spoke well of the hospital during his testimony, while noting that there was more work to be done, and so did the other JFL testifiers, including Dr. Ken Okolo, PhD, JFL's new chief operating officer, who acknowledged that improvements were needed and that some employees must be retrained.

Yet, it was the senators, each with seven-minute rounds, who tore into the hospital's CEO for what they deemed as a situation where bad choices were overshadowing the positive strides being made at JFL.

Sen. Vialet, for instance, agreed with the pay raises, but took issue with the retroactive payouts.

"In reference to the raise, I know that a number of individuals in the hospital are extremely hard workers, and I applaud them for the service that they have given to the hospital on a regular basis," Vialet began. "The part that I don't agree with was the retroactivity. You could have really justified the raises because of the change in positions, the hard work, et cetera, but the retroactivity, I think you should have really held off on at this point because of the financial situation of the hospital."

Senator Kenneth Gittens started off by commending the hospital for the progress it has made, but asked the five JFL board members to again examine the raises and consider making some adjustments.

"I'm charging all of you to go back and revisit these raises that you all gave out here the other day," he said. "And I'm not saying that you have to pull them back 100 percent, but let's do it responsibly."

Gittens continued, "We're running a government here, we're running a hospital here that we're saying is broke, but on the front end, before we could see any finances coming in, we're starting to give all these raises. I think it is irresponsible.

"Unless we see where these monies are coming in from, but right now, I believe that we're spending like a bunch of drunken sailors. Why is this? And that's why I say poor decisions are just overshadowing the good," Gittens said.

Dr. Griffith, who was called upon to take up the CEO position at a time when the hospital was in critical need of leadership, pushed back on Sen. Terrence "Positive" Nelson's assertion that he should consider relinquishing his role at the hospital and focus solely on his private practice, stating that if there was anyone else to do the job at the time when he was called upon, he would have not taken the position.

But, Griffith said, "I took this job because the hospital needed me at that time. I don't runaway from a fight, I don't runaway from my patients, [and] I don't runaway from my home when I am needed.

"Look, if there was another candidate available at the time, I would have said no, [but] I'm not going to sit here and jump ship when this hospital is in crisis. If we lose our hospital, none of it matters."

Nelson pressed Griffith, however, stating that the raises given was a "bad management call."

"You can't give raises like that, [when] you're squawking for money for a long time. I hear you about wanting to retain people, but you said you have 601 employees. Most of those employees didn't get those raises, so you are actually adding to the demoralization of those same employees that you're saying you're trying to lift [their] morale, period," Nelson contended.

Yet, even with all the chastising Griffith received at the hearing, the CEO stood firm by his decisions to give the pay raises and retroactive pay, and also by his decision to hire Michael Younger, who has had many run-ins with the law in the state of Colorado.

In relation to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS), Griffith said the hospital was 70 percent complete in its corrective measures; however, he said without the more than $10 million "Cost of Plan of Correction" monies the hospital is requesting from the Senate, JFL won't be able to complete the changes mandated by CMS, and thereby risk the chance of losing accreditation, which would see services like Medicare and Medicaid leaving St. Croix.

In the end, even as senator after senator pounded Griffith, the commitment still remained to make sure JFL did not lose accreditation. This notion was accentuated best by Senator-at-Large Rocky Liburd, who made clear that the territory needed both JFL and the Roy L. Schneider hospitals to succeed.