

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Retirees Group Hosts Panel Discussion To Explore Restructuring Of V.I. Legislature

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The St. Croix Government Retirees, Inc., an independent organization whose mission is to ensure the preservation of the Government Employees Retirees System, Tuesday hosted a panel discussion and public information session at the University of the Virgin Islands Albert A. Sheen Great Hall on St. Croix to explore the topic of the reapportionment of the V. I. Legislature.

The subject has come to the forefront in recent weeks with Sen. Terrance "Positive" Nelson's announcement that he had authored a bill that seeks to restructure the current 15-member Senate to an 11-member body. Nelson's bill proposes that there be three representatives from St. Croix, three from St. Thomas-St. John, and five at-large

senators.

Mary Moorhead, president of the St. Croix Government Retirees, Inc., told *VI Consortium* her group felt it necessary to host the discussion because "we've seen that, because of the imbalance, the lack of the checks and balances in the Legislature, that it becomes a problem when we go to the Legislature to advocate for situations in so far as getting things passed. So, we saw that if we're going to move forward in any kind of way, we have to make sure and have some correction in the government itself."

While Nelson and former senator Ronald Russell, both of whom were panelists at Tuesday's forum, agree there should be a restructuring of the V.I. Legislature, they hold opposing views as to how it should be done.

Russell says he doesn't want to "reinvent the wheel." Thus, he is proposing that there be territorial at-large senators and district senators so elected officials "are not all elected in the same way and the same year."



considered as an option.

Attendees at a panel discussion

and public information session at the University of the Virgin Islands Albert A. Sheen Great Hall on St. Croix

"I believe senators should have a certain degree of accountability to a constituency that they should serve," he said.

Nelson outlined his point of view.

"We have a unicameral Legislature. Somewhere in the Organic Act, they gave us, at one point, four at-large [senators] and five per district, and one from St. John. At another point, we had four at-large [senators], one from St. John, three from St. Thomas and three from St. Croix," Nelson explained.

"What I'm proposing is to go back to three per district. When I consider district, there are only two political districts that I'm aware of -- St. Croix makes up one and St. Thomas-St. John makes up the other," he said.

Nelson says he is proposing for the numbers to be arranged that way because he believes "it will force the electorate to be more responsible with your vote. With three individuals per district, it's a tie pool. We would have to appeal to you in many ways. The sound bytes, the hum drums, the fish fries, you will bypass because you only have three votes," he said. "With five at-large, you'll have a larger pool tending to the business of the entire territory."

Popular radio talk show host, Mario Moorhead, who also sat on the panel, supports the reinstatement of an 11-member Senate, but unlike Nelson, he is pushing for the break down to be three representatives from St. Croix, three from St. Thomas, one from St. John, and four at-large -- the way it used to be when the U.S. Congress first established the system.

"The U.S. Congress, following their constitutional mandate, is fair enough to give a majority-black population a checks and balance government. A unicameral body. A Legislature with one House, one Chamber that acts like two. Because it started with 11 members and they split it so that four of those 11 members could be elected at-large to represent places. Seven members to represent the people," he said.

"Again, I don't know how our lawmakers don't recognize that we have three Legislative districts, not two," Moorhead continued.

"St. John was a district, St. Thomas was a district and St. Croix was a district. Three districts. Eleven senators divided so that they can provide checks and balance for each other. Four at-large representing the geographic area -- the territory. The seven will represent the people. People checking place and place checking people.

"For almost have a century, St. John has no representative and nobody seems to care," Moorhead continued. "You have a supposed senator from St. John, elected at-large. Now are there 2,000 voters in St. John? So, the representative from St. John, who is at-large, is going to be more popular, more liked and curryfavoring more to either St. Thomas or St. Croix -- not St. John. St. John was swallowed up by St. Thomas. Two districts and we're good to go. Because what has happened, we have no accountability."

However, Russell vehemently disagreed with the notion of St. John having its own legislative representative. Currently, the island does not have a representative in the V.I. Legislature, but the territory's at-large senator is elected from St. John.

"I don't believe St. John should have a single representative outside of the district of St. Thomas-St. John," Russell began.

Some audience members became agitated by the former senator's strong stance and loudly question his position.

"Listen to what I'm saying and then maybe you could disagree," he continued. "My involvement in the Legislature demonstrates that that set up always works against St. Croix. Because of the economic structure, the social structure and what was done to St. John when half or more than two-thirds of St. John was made a national park. It can't sustain itself no more without St. Thomas. So, when you put any representative from St. John, he is inherently tied into St. Thomas before being fair to St. Croix.

"I don't agree with that because it's about fairness. You don't put a structure that is inherently against the bigger island because you feel St. John is a separate island. So, I totally disagree with that. I was in the institution when I saw it work against St. Croix and I've seen it work against St. Croix for the last 40 years.

"The reality is that St. John is not existing without St. Thomas. And if you give one representative to St. John, he is beholding to St. Thomas and I stand strongly on that," Russell said.

Nelson also advocates that St. John remains without a dedicated legislative representative, pointing out that all of St. John's infrastructure is on St. Thomas.

At the end of the session, Mary Moorhead told *VI Consortium*, "As one of the presenters suggested, my brother, when Congress gave us a Legislature in 1954, it gave us with three districts, each island being a district. And therefore having the checks and balances and the equal representation that is needed. So, we thought we'd begin by educating the public of what restructuring is about and have some dialogue on the different options."

Moorhead says her organization hopes to continue these educational forums in the future.