

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Fighting For Money: St. Thomas Senators Say They Want Half Of Road Project Funds For Their District

Politics / **Published On June 09, 2015 11:51 AM /**

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ST. THOMAS -- It was supposed to be an announcement that brings the territory together and usher a new lease of life to St. Croix, the district of the U.S. Virgin Islands with an economy that's in dire need of boosting, and with the roads in most need of repair.

But when the Department of Public Works (DPW) Commissioner nominee, Gustav James, re-introduced bill No. 31-0073 to members of the 31st Legislature's Committee on Finance, chaired by Sen. Clifford Graham on Tuesday, the conversation turned into a discussion on fairness, with St. Thomas senators making the case for why their district should receive half of the federal Grant Revenue Vehicles (GRV) funds, some \$75 million

the Kenneth Mapp administration is seeking.

The finance committee consists of seven members, four of whom are from St. Thomas: Graham, Sen. Myron D. Jackson, Sen. Marvin Blyden and Sen. Tregenza A. Roach. For St. Croix, Sen. Kurt Violet, who's the committee's vice chair, Sen. Terrence "Positive" Nelson and Sen. Samuel Sanes make up the remaining three. So St. Thomas controls the committee of finance -- one of the most important committees in the senate.

If we're talking about one territory and we're talking about enhancing the total product, why is there a fight? It should not be a fight. - Sen. Terrence "Positive" Nelson.

The uneasy back-and-forth began when Sen. Violet said he did not understand the sudden notion of fairness after Commissioner nominee James said that \$60 million of the \$75 million would be earmarked for work on St. Croix because the roads there were the territory's most damaged.

"As we were going through some of the testimony, I kept on hearing this reference back to how we're going to split X, Y, and Z, and a lot of times the split was so unfair in the past. But now that there's an attempt to equalize or receive some kind of parity, all of a sudden we need 50/50," Violet said.

Violet went on, adding that St. Croix is way behind in economic development. He referenced a recent hearing where the promotion of St. Croix as a tourism product was being pitched, and how St. Thomas senators again doubted the viability of the big island, questioning the impact of the proposal.

"What was the impact when HOVENSA was pouring monies into the [St. Thomas] economy," Violet argued. "What is the impact now that we're utilizing the rum company funds to float bonds for projects on St. Thomas," he went on. "But every time there's something for St. Croix, there's some type of discussion."

The bill, in its original form, sought to provide 100 percent of the funding to St. Croix, however St. Thomas senators would not allow it. And since the deal would die without their approval, compromise from the St. Croix side was inevitable. In the end, the big island's legislators settled for a 55/45 split in favor of St. Croix.

The Mapp administration's agreement with the Federal Highway Administration, the agency providing the GRV funds, allows the local government to spend \$16 million of its local dollars in debt services, which would allow the \$75 million to stretch to \$100 million according to James. This makes the first phase of the Veteran's Drive project that St. Thomas senators lobbied to be added to the measure a reality (total cost is \$110 million), while the remaining \$60 million would be allocated for road work on St. Croix.

Sen. Nelson said over the years he became accustomed to St. Thomas senators getting "up in arms" about distribution of resources between the two districts, a behavior he classified as "strange." "But if we were to really do a proper assessment and you look at the frequently traveled roads that are in bad condition, you'll find that St. Croix significantly outweighs St. Thomas as it relates to frequently traveled roads that are in bad condition."

Nelson went on: "And I hear some of the St. Thomas senators complain about it, but there are not many frequently traveled roads that are in the condition that many of the main roads on St. Croix are. And at some point, we have to be fair in the distribution of resources throughout the territory. At some point we have to see where the fix is. You all walk around and drive around on St. Croix; you all complain about the roads as well, so if we're talking about one territory and we're talking about enhancing the total product, why is there a fight? It should not be a fight," Nelson said.

Sen. Nereida "Nellie" Rivera-O'Reilly likened the situation to two birds that are willing to share pieces from the same bread, hailing the 31st Legislature as a new day for St. Croix, even as she compromised St. Croix's portion of the funds, moving from \$60 million to \$55 million, "because it's that important to me that this happens," Rivera-O'Reilly said.

Rivera-O'Reilly rolled back the curtain to 2001 when, she said, the first set of bonds were floated. The lawmaker recalled that 100 percent of the money was spent on St. Thomas and St. John. The St. Croix independent senator also reminded the Senate of legislation passed in the 30th Legislature in 2014 that allocates \$700,000 annually for 30 years, coming from the St. Croix rum cover-over funds, for the University of the Virgin Island's medical school to be built on St. Thomas. "That's \$20 million dollars," Rivera-O'Reilly said, exhaling a stressful sigh as she made those remarks.

But the committee's chairman, Sen. Clifford Graham, insisted on St. Thomas getting at least half of the funds from Public Works' massive undertaking of rebuilding the territory's roads.

Sen. Justin Harrigan Sr. of St. Thomas echoed Graham, agreeing with the notion that St. Thomas should be treated equally in relation to the allocation of the funds.

"You know, I cringed when I heard that 100 percent of the funds were going St. Croix," Harrigan said. "I try to devoid myself of such conversations, but it hurts me a little bit to hear my colleague of the other side enumerate all of those projects and say that they're being left out."

Sen. Roach, while he didn't say much about receiving half of the funds for the St. Thomas-St. John district, acknowledged the amendments that were proposed to add St. Thomas to the equation. "I await those," he said.

So the plan to make available 100 percent of the GRV funds for road work on St. Croix died before it could be born, because St. Thomas senators were vehemently opposed to it.

After compromise by way of amendments, all seven of the committee members voted in the affirmative of the measure, which now heads to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, chaired by Sen. Kenneth "Kenny" Gittens, for ratification.