

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Progress Made At Election Reform Town Hall Meetings And Working Sessions, Gittens Says

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St. Croix -- Chairman of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary Sen. Kenneth "Kenny" Gittens, over the weekend, said that he sees progress in the outcome of the two-day working session held last week focused on election reform for the territory, according to a press release the senator's office issued on Sunday.

Gittens said the round-table discussions were attended by some members of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, some members of the Joint Boards of Election from both districts, and election system officials, namely the supervisor and deputy supervisor.

During the meetings, attendees spoke freely and offered their suggestions on various sections of Title 18 of the Virgin Islands Code. They dissected and analyzed it line-by-line, and it was evident that many in the group wanted new legislation aimed at improving the administration of elections in the territory.

Said Gittens: "The need to fix the election process is clear; as many citizens and elected officials share some of the same concerns. The public wants and expects its elected representatives to address and fix the problems before the next election and that is what we intend to do."

The second-term senator said through the interactions among the group, he saw that those involved were really committed to election reform. He said the group of about 15 was able to start the process of going through Title 18, which they agree is in need of revision; highlighting the many segments in the code that contradict each other and did not take into consideration the technological advances the territory has made in recent years.

"We got through a portion of the chapters and have agreed to meet monthly so that we can continue to make changes to the election laws," Gittens went on. "We spent an inordinate amount of time just focused on the definitions in the title, realizing that too created a lot of the conflicts."

The community and some elected officials, during the town hall meetings, spoke about the requirement of political parties being responsible for their own primary elections, yet year-after-year the primaries are funded on the backs of taxpayers. Gittens, a Democrat, was one of those elected officials who repeatedly questioned the issue and expressed dissatisfaction.

"It is not the taxpayer's responsibility to fund party primaries; therefore, it's time for all party leadership to get busy and start planning and strategizing its own primary for selection of party candidates," he said. "Obviously, there's a desire for a complete overhaul of our election process - there's no question."

"Therefore, Senators "Nellie" O'Reilly and Novelle Francis and I, who attended the 2-day working sessions, and other senators, such as Justin Harrigan, Sr., Clifford Graham, Marvin Blyden, Jean Forde and Tregenza Roach -- all of whom attended at least one of the town hall meetings, through participation -- have shown and expressed the commitment to moving legislative action in order for our uniformed standards to match up to the 21st century," Gittens concluded.

Gittens encourages continued community involvement and asks that additional suggestions be submitted to fstokes@legvi.org or by calling 340-712-2279.

Feature Image: A supporter of former Sen. Alicia "Chucky" Hansen holds up a write-in sign during the 2014 General Election.