

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senate Revives Ferry Service Between St. Croix And St. Thomas, Measure Heads To Rules Committee

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ST. THOMAS -- Members of the Senate Committee on Housing, Public Works and Waste Management, chaired by Senator Marvin Blyden, gathered at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall on Monday to take action on bill [No. 31-0137](#) -- an act establishing the Virgin Islands Ferryboat Fund as a separate and distinct fund in the Treasury of the Virgin Islands.

The measure would reestablish affordable ferry travel between St. Croix and St. Thomas, which came to a halt several years ago.

Sponsored by Senate President Neville James, the bill saw universal support from the senators, some of whom asked that their names be added to the measure. They also highlighted the many benefits a revival of ferry service between the islands would bring to the territory.

According to Acting Commissioner of the Department of Public Works (DPW), Gustav James, who was summoned to give testimony on the measure, the government has already secured \$7.5 million to purchase three vessels costing between \$8-\$10 million each. However, James said the process of searching for the first vessel had already commenced since they intend to purchase the ferryboats as funding is made available.

Funds for the service, according to the bill, would be provided by the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration Ferryboats and Terminal, and monies provided from "time-to-time" by the Legislature would remain in the fund until expended. The bill also charges the commissioner of finance to submit quarterly reports of the fund's disbursements and its "unobligated balance."

At-Large Sen. Almando "Rocky" Liburd said he would like to see the project come to life because it would finally unite residents of the territory, although it would be a costly venture.

"I think this is an excellent idea, but I just want to caution people that this is not a cheap idea," said the At-Large senator. Liburd said the service's success would be dependent on the quality of the ride, so making sure that the right boats are purchased should be of utmost importance.

"It's probably the best thing that could happen to the Virgin Islands because we're going to bring our islands together," he added. "We will bring our people together. This St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. John will end, because people can travel at a reasonable rate. So make it a real priority because you're going to see a change in the way we live."

Sen. Novelle Francis also commended the efforts and remarked that the service should be affordable.

Responding to a question from Kurt Vialet, freshman senator from St. Croix, James said his department is affording itself six months before the service is deployed, which would allow them to assess the field, look at operators and measure costs, among other important variables and factors.

And in relation to the agreement, Vialet asked James whether other jurisdictions were being examined where federal funds were given to purchase ferryboats, and the operation of the ferries turned over to private entities to run. The reason for the question, Vialet said, was to make sure that best practices are adopted so as to not fall out of the grace with the Feds; which would in turn jeopardize funding.

James said they've looked at Puerto Rico, which has government-run ferryboat services. However, the services are not efficient, he said, therefore allowing the ferries to be operated by private entities would be better suited for the territory.

"And I don't have a problem with that," Vialet responded. "I just want to make sure that we adhere to the federal mandates and that we don't jeopardize any future funds."

Because of this, Violet said he would be providing amendments to clarify language in the measure in an effort to protect the territory from losing federal dollars.

Even so, Violet lauded the measure and reminisced on the positive effects past ferry services between the two islands have had on the economy.

"When we had the ferryboat service between St. Thomas and St. Croix, just something like the Agriculture Fair, we had an impact of up to 1,000 individuals being able to come over to St. Croix at a very reasonable rate. [They'd] go to the fair, shop, and carry over large plants in baskets and go back to St. Thomas without it being restrictive. And if you look at the numbers for [the] Agriculture Fair and other activities, it's been a tremendous impact."

The federal government wants DPW to be more involved in the operations of the ferry, although DPW won't be managing. The local government has also purchased insurance, and its current agreement with the federal government is being revised, the acting commissioner said.

Senator James thanked his colleagues for "what appears to be their unanimous support," of the measure. He also took some time to criticize Seaborne Airlines and what he deemed as unfavorable travel rates being provided to the islands' residents.

"I love the downtown-to-downtown service that Seaborne is providing," Sen. James began. "The employees, they treat us well. But management has abused the people of the Virgin Islands, and if we were to get this type of transportation infrastructure in place, it would affect the price. And it will also affect performance and how they look at us as a people."

Sen. Clifford Graham, also in support of the bill, suggested that as a way to get more passengers aside from the St. Thomas/St. Croix route, legislators should look to Puerto Rico to "loop" the islands and "connect all of us," something James said Puerto Rico's secretary of transportation is interested in doing.

Voting in favor of the bill were all the senators who make up the Committee on Housing, Public Works and Waste Management -- Blyden, Graham, Jean Forde, James, Liburd, Kenneth Gittens and Nereida "Nellie" Rivera-O'Reilly. The measure now heads to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, chaired by Sen. Gittens.

Feature Image: \$8 million ferryboat similar to what the VI Government is considering.