

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Controversy Over Closure Of Fire Stations On St. Croix As Administration, Senators Release Contradicting Statements

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ST. CROIX -- Members of the Virgin Islands Fire Service converged on the Cardiac Center yesterday in what was described as a hurriedly-organized meeting with VIFS Acting Director Eugene Farrell and Governor Kenneth Mapp, to discuss and bring to a close the problems employees of the agency have openly and in secret expressed.

Governor Mapp, at the meeting, said while he did not know what would be Farrell's fate when the full Senate body votes on his nomination, "I want my director."

While the meeting was ongoing, senators, including Rules and Judiciary Chairman Kenneth Gittens, alleged that the government shuttered all fire stations on St. Croix so servicemen and women could attend the meeting.

For Gittens, who said he was not surprised by the move, it was disheartening nonetheless.

"I am not surprised by this action but it was quite troubling and disheartening to learn of such poor management decision. It was rather obvious that the leadership of the department had very little to no consideration for the protection of life and property in our community as the decision was made to temporarily close all fire stations on St. Croix – removing emergency resources from the strategic locations," Gittens said.

He added: "Closing down our fire stations like this, results in delayed response time should there be a call for service in either of our town areas, especially where structures are so close to each other and is so highly populated. With this in mind, a fire can intensify rapidly, and the risk of increased property damage and danger to people can increase dramatically."

Government House, however, issued a press release on behalf of Farrell late Monday contending that there were "erroneous" reports being circulated by some senators and radio talk show hosts that all fire stations on the island were closed to facilitate the makeshift meeting. The release further stated that VIFS holds annual meetings to discuss the needs of firefighters, and that in the event of a fire or need for emergency response, units are capable of reacting immediately from any location.

"In fact, firefighters responded to a brushfire and were dispatched directly from the meeting and the VIFS was successful in containing the fire," the release stated.

But there was no doubt that the meeting was hastily organized and included no agenda, a point of offense to at least one firefighter on Monday.

"When the union was reaching out to you, you said you're not coming to no meeting without an agenda," Fire Marshal Clifford Joseph told Farrell. "So we would have preferred, when you're calling for a meeting, [that you set] an agenda on the table also. It's only fair that whatever you want for yourself, you want for us. We want to be treated how we're supposed to be treated."

If the hope was to defuse tensions between Farrell and firefighters here, the mission remains unaccomplished; as VIFS employees continued to express their dissatisfaction with Farrell's leadership.

One such fireman, among many, was George Otto, who said every director, upon being chosen to lead the department, has personally visited the island to speak to the men and women of the department. However, "your first encounter with us was on a teleconference. And in that teleconference, a statement was made by you [that] 'we don't want you to come over here,' because when you come, we won't want it.' That was your statement to us," Otto said to Farrell.

Otto went on, stating that Farrell, in his newly nominated position, doesn't seem to know how to talk to his employees, "and that's the main problem," he said. Then, looking at the

director nominee intently, Otto said, “it’s not just your style and how you do things, but your personality. Your personality stuck out like a sore thumb, and I’m not saying this to be disrespectful, but I’m going to say what’s on my mind.”

Otto added: “Your personality was very harsh and abrasive like you didn’t care. And even when we told you about moral, a simple thing as coming here and changing our emblem without even asking the masses, that means something. That emblem is us, and you have to ask us what we feel about it. Regardless of what you said about St. Croix being touchy. We’re not touchy, we’re just real.”

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