

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill For Reconstruction Of Territory's Roads Moves Forward

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ST. THOMAS -- Members of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary gathered at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall on Tuesday to hear testimony from various Governor Kenneth Mapp nominees for three boards, however it was the favorable approval of bill No. 31-0073 -- whose chief sponsor is Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly -- that senators say will help kickstart the territory's ascent into prosperity.

Rivera-O'Reilly, who would eventually make the motion to move her legislation forward, gave a brief history of the measure that she'd been championing since the 30th Legislature. She said the original bill saw \$70 million going solely to St. Croix for the island's infrastructure, but opposition from senators here derailed that effort. And Rivera-

O'Reilly, being in the minority, did not have enough votes to force the bill through.

"I learned the art of compromise after six and a half years in this body, and I decided that something is better than nothing," Rivera-O'Reilly said. "And I am not a member of the majority; I am only one of fifteen, and sitting in the minority, I get it. If I want any action for my district, I am going to have give in."

Rivera-O'Reilly, who was quick to point out that she's been a "very strong advocate for St. Croix," said the measure would now see the Government of the Virgin Islands floating bonds worth some \$250 million based on an anticipated increase in the annual appropriation that the Dept. of Public Works gets through the Federal Department of Transportation. The original amount was \$105 million, however an amendment offered by the Mapp administration increased the total, citing ongoing efforts with the DOT to increase the territory's annual highway appropriation from \$16 million to \$70 million. Once the bonds have been floated, the split per district would be 55/45 in favor of St. Croix.

The bill has seen overwhelming support by members of the 31st Legislature as all senators have attached their names to the measure as co-sponsors, and members of the committee, chaired by Sen. Kenneth Gittens, spoke in favor in the measure and its economic benefits yesterday.

The bill is a "win-win for the entire Virgin Islands," Sen. Novelle Francis, freshman St. Croix Democrat, said. "It's an opportunity for us to leverage some of the highway safety funds that will be used for \$105 million injection," he added.

Francis said he raised some concerns with Rivera-O'Reilly in relation to the amendment increasing the loan from \$105 million to \$250 million, and said it is important to educate the community on the increase, because there remains an apprehension among constituents whenever borrowing is in the equation.

Senator Justin Harrigan Sr. said while he does not believe borrowing should be an option that is lightly considered, "there are times when borrowing is necessary," he said, "there are times when we do have to float bonds." The freshman Democrat from this district added that the reconstruction of the territory's roads would put people to work and spur economic activity, and also entice businesses to expand.

And while Senate President Neville James praised the bill and its sponsor for the foresight and due diligence that has lead to the current juncture, he doubted the Mapp administration's ability to convince the federal government to raise DPW's annual highway appropriation from \$16 million to \$70 million.

"I don't know about this \$250 million," James began. "I believe that it is nothing but talk from the administration."

He went on: "The fact that we could jump from \$105 and not double [that amount] but exceed it by another \$145 million, is stunning." James said it was the administration's responsibility to provide documentation from the federal government that would allow the Senate to "feel comfortable" in its decision to commit.

If the Mapp administration's efforts are successful, St. Croix would see no less than \$137,500,000, with the remaining amount going to St. Thomas. Rivera-O'Reilly reminded lawmakers that without the Department of Transportation's approval, the bill will not be able to move forward.

The measure was favorably forwarded to the full Senate for its consideration by all senators present at Tuesday's hearing.

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