

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senator Drafts Measure That Would Require Innovative To Reopen Cashier Windows

Business / **Published On December 10, 2015 08:45 PM /**

Staff **December 10, 2015**



ST. THOMAS -- Senator Jean Forde announced on Wednesday via press release that he has submitted draft legislation, currently designated as bill request no. 15-1152, which would require that all public utilities, including Innovative Communications Corporation, maintain an office where customers can pay their bills in person. Above, four empty cashier windows, where Innovative employees once received bill payments.

The proposal comes in response to public outcry over the recent decision by Innovative to discontinue the operations of its payment windows. According to Mr. Forde, the measure would be of tremendous importance to many residents, particularly the elderly, who do not have access to the Internet or are uncomfortable with latest technologies.

“While I understand that online payment is rapidly becoming the norm around the world, we must recognize that there are many who are not yet part of the ‘digital revolution’ and we must make some provisions for them,” said the St. Thomas Democrat. Mr. Forde noted that this is especially important in the Virgin Islands, where senior citizens make up a significant percentage of the population. In the last twenty years, persons 65 years and



Senator Jeane Forde

The first-term senator said that telephone companies can be required by law to maintain a payment office or window because of their status as public utilities.

“Companies that provide services such as public transportation, telephone service, electric power service and the like, regardless of whether they are privately or public owned, are declared by our laws to be ‘affected with a public interest’. As such, they are subject to a greater level of regulation and scrutiny,” Mr. Forde said.

Mr. Forde further noted that if seniors are forced to rely on others to make online or telephone payments on their behalf, they are at greater risk for identity theft and other forms of financial abuse.

“It is our sacred responsibility to ensure that our elders are protected and empowered to the greatest extent possible,” he said.

But Mr. Forde failed to mention in his press release that Innovative, the company at the center of the controversy, still offers multiple payment options to those who are not Internet savvy; including making payments at the three major banks here: Firstbank, Scotiabank and Banco Popular. Residents unfamiliar with payments via the web also have the option of posting their payments through mail, and they could also call Innovative directly. Even a drop box remains available, located along the outside wall of the office. And lastly, there's the option of automatic credit card billing, according to [this notice](#) posted by the company.

Innovative, [now owned by Atlantic Tele-Network](#) (ATN), which operates in the territory as Choice Communications, was cutting cost by offering employees incentives to [retire or face dismissal](#) even before ATN's \$145 million acquisition. Shawn O'Donnell, president

and chief executive officer at Caribbean Asset Holdings (Innovative Companies), in September informed employees on both islands that the company had to let go 80 people as it was in the process of selling, and would offer bonus packages to those who chose what Innovative deemed “voluntary separation” to employees eligible for retirement. The trimming continued into November, as the company made known that it would no longer be accepting bill payments through its business locations.

Mr. Forde said he intends to offer the measure in the next Legislative Session on December 15-16.