

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Gittens, James, Set Record Straight On Fund Created To Benefit Nonprofits And Youth

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ST. CROIX -- In separate press releases issued on Monday, Senators Kenneth Gittens and Neville James clarified what they said were erroneous statements making the rounds in the media concerning a \$1.5 million charity bill passed by the 31st Legislature in September and signed into law by Governor Kenneth Mapp.

"In listening to a radio talk show today and then reading a newspaper editorial, I am dumbfounded as to how the hosts and editors could be so irresponsible as to try to lead residents into believing that the passage of this bill was in some way a sneaky, self-serving tactic on the part of individual senators, which would be furthest from the truth," Mr. Gittens said.

During the December 29 session where the ArcLight Capital Partners, LLC agreement was ratified, senators acted on creating the fund where the monies will be kept, in accordance with the intent of the appropriation which will be funded by the rum cover-over taxes, according to the Gittens release.

That same sentiment was shared by Mr. James.

"During the fiscal year 2016 budget modification period, it was clear to members of the majority caucus that many of the non-profit entities that benefit from appropriations in the miscellaneous section of the budget were being adversely impacted for various reasons. As a result, the majority caucus has taken the position that the creation of a fund to assist in addressing those entities is one of many ways to provide much needed and appreciated relief" Mr. James, currently serving as Senate president, said.

According to the release issued by Mr. James' office, the initial funding was realized in ACT 7758 in the amount of \$1.5 million. During a Committee of Finance hearing on September 8, 2015, the committee was informed of an unanticipated \$7 million cover-over revenue rebate during FY 2015, which was the source of the aforementioned appropriation.

"After the initial appropriation was signed into law by Governor Kenneth E. Mapp, we were informed by the Legislature's Legal Counsel Division that there was a need for the creation of a fund to administer the managerial duties associated with fund management and the Commissioner of Finance is vested with this responsibility," Mr. James went on. "As per local law, governmental agencies will serve as the respective custodian for whichever non-profit beneficiary receives funding. By adopting Bill 31-0299, the legislature has exercised our authority as the appropriating arm of government and is looking forward to playing a part in the critical services our non-profit organizations provide throughout the territory."

Senator Gittens decried allegations that the \$1.5 million are really for campaigning purposes, and given to senators as a kickback for supporting the ArcLight/GVI operating agreement.

"I've heard allegations of these monies being campaign slush funds, allegations of connections to the ArcLight agreement support, and all other types of erroneous information that this will somehow be a self-serving fund. I have never and would never be party to any such act. Furthermore, the members of this institution made decisions regarding these funds in good faith and with the best interest of the people of the territory at heart," Mr. Gittens said.

The senator said those who will benefit from the funds will be the territory's youth organizations, community-based organizations, schools and other nonprofit organizations who turn to the legislature seeking financial support for a number of activities and causes over the course of any given year that they cannot personally sustain.

"I urge residents to be wary of those who seek to misinform and encourage you to seek out truth as we continue to strive collectively for a better Virgin Islands," Mr. Gittens concluded.

Mr. James shared his distaste with the allegations as well: "I will not engage in the speculative rhetoric that serves no purpose other than to polarize a small community like ours. There are numerous entities that reach out to the members of the first branch of government asking us to legitimately assist them and as leaders we have exercised in a transparent and responsible way, via legislation, a mechanism that will help those who unselfishly give of themselves to make for a better United States Virgin Islands."

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