

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Residents Not Benefiting From V.I.'s Fiber Network Because I.S.P.s Moving Too Slow, Says V.I.N.G.N. Boss

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ST. THOMAS -- The Virgin Islands owns one of the most powerful and efficient fiber networks in all of the United States. The network is so powerful that major firms -- including one that wants to invest \$1 billion in an undisclosed project on St. Croix, according to the Virgin Islands Next Generation Network CEO, Dr. Tonjia Coverdale -- have been in talks with Dr. Coverdale for the network's service. She said at a Committee on Economic Development, Agriculture & Planning hearing on Wednesday that just one such client could yield roughly \$1 million a month for the territory, an estimate that piqued the interest of Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly and others.

Dr. Coverdale waged her argument on two fronts: first, she said when she attempted to introduce the plan to V.I.N.G.N.'s board, the members bucked, instead choosing to discuss how much of a benefit can the powerful network be to government departments and agencies. Second, Dr. Coverdale lamented the slow movement of local Internet service providers (I.S.P.s) in the territory, that make use of V.I.N.G.N.'s power but have so far failed to build their own infrastructure that would enable them to provide break-neck Internet speeds to residents at an affordable price.

The highly educated Coverdale, a former professor at the University of the Virgin Islands and an I.T. executive who was educated at Morgan State University, came fully prepared to challenge the 31st Legislature in an effort to clear the hurdles that she says are impeding progress. She asked for legislation to be written that would allow V.I.N.G.N. to bypass the local I.S.P.s and go directly to residents.

But while the legislators seemed to embrace the semiautonomous agency's plan to expand services outside the territory, most resisted strongly the idea of giving V.I.N.G.N. the power to bypass local I.S.P.s, arguing that such a move would cripple those players. Dr. Coverdale clashed with Senator Kurt Vialet in particular, who strongly opposed Dr. Coverdale's position, seemingly, on both matters. She then suggested that the senator's final stance should come down to who he represents, the idea being if he opposed her plan, that would mean he's on the side of big business and not residents. Dr. Coverdale was swiftly rebuked by Mr. Vialet, who contended that he's not only a senator of the people, but of all segments of the community.

Even so, the combative and passionate Coverdale found a voice in multiple senators, who, while chastising the C.E.O. for her bold assertion, commended her vigor, and called for a middle ground. Senator Myron Jackson, supporting Dr. Coverdale's push while remaining mindful of the risk her forward-thinking ideas pose to local I.S.P.s, said the future of the territory hinges on technology. He said he wanted residents to benefit from the powerful network sooner rather than later, and also referenced Governor Kenneth Mapp, who spoke of technology at his latest State of the Territory address, as the way forward.

For Dr. Coverdale, however, her goal was to ensure that senators and residents understood the power of V.I.N.G.N. and what it can do for the territory -- even if it meant upsetting those who resist change.

"My goal is to make sure that this technology touches every Virgin Islander because I really understand the potential that it has to transform the economy. So I strove to be very truthful and I know that there are a lot of feathers that I ruffled," she said in her closing remarks at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall. "However, my goal was to make sure that if I'm not sitting here and this is my last time addressing you guys, that you would know what the technology can do. And don't let anybody tell you that it can't do it. Think big and understand that we really do have the power."

Dr. Coverdale's vision is indeed gargantuan. In September of last year, she told The Consortium that St. Croix stood to be the next [Silicon Valley of the Caribbean](#).

"I want people to understand what we have here in the Virgin Islands. We are a major player," she said. "I do want to say that St. Croix is going to be the epicenter for this

technological revolution. We have targeted here, starting with the [Cisco academy](#), and St. Croix is going to be the Silicon Valley of the Caribbean.”

Feature Image: Dr. Tonjia Coverdale

Image Credit: 31st Legislature

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