The Virgin Islands Consortium

B.I.T. Given Authority To Provide Internet Service To Government Agencies; Dealing Blow To Local I.S.P.s

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ST. THOMAS -- The Bureau of Information Technology since December 18 of last year has had the authority, through a master service agreement (M.S.A.), to provide internet service to most government agencies, a move that could potentially cripple local Internet service providers (I.S.P.s), that have for many years serviced the government.

The revelation, which had been floating among senators and insiders for some time, was confirmed by B.I.T. Director Reuben Molloy at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall on Wednesday, during a Committee on Economic Development, Agriculture & Planning hearing. Through the M.S.A., which was crafted by the Virgin Islands Next Generation Network's legal counsel, B.I.T. now serves under V.I.N.G.N., with its main purpose being to serve as an I.S.P. for the government.

But senators were not pleased with the news. They questioned Mr. Molloy, who at times seemed flustered, and at one point used his Fifth Amendment right to not answer a question posed by Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, concerning whether he agreed with Governor Kenneth Mapp's decision to turn B.I.T. into an I.S.P.

Even so, Mr. Molloy sought to cast a positive light on B.I.T.'s new role, arguing that the government would now be seeing considerable savings, as they will no longer be subjected to the high cost of using the local I.S.P.s

"[B.I.T.] being an I.S.P. has pretty much cut the private sector at their knees," said Senator Novelle Francis, an assertion Mr. Molloy seemed to agree with: "I'll take your word for it," Mr. Molloy said.

Senator Clifford Graham, chairman of the powerful Finance Committee, added his disappointed, chiding Mr. Molloy for what Mr. Graham called "side-swiping" of local I.S.P.s

"I'm not sure I'm in agreement with B.I.T. becoming the sole I.S.P. for the government," he said. He said it was a disservice to these businesses, who signed contracts with the government and invested in their infrastructure, and were suddenly being left for dead.

"It seems like overnight the government just decided that we're going to become our own I.S.P. and side-swipe the private companies," Mr. Graham added. He then highlighted revenues the government stands to lose because of its seemingly hurried decision. He said the government will not only lose corporate and gross receipt taxes, "we should include unemployment because the private companies have to let people go, and then we lose the recirculating effect that dollar -- that multiplying factor of when the private employee gets paid and go out to dinner and the movies, and that money circulates in the economy."

He added: "When we look at the whole structure of government, private companies pay taxes, and taxes is what fund government. And what we're doing is looking at reducing the private sector and in essence reducing revenues to the government."

Mr. Graham's assessment of the situation was echoed by many senators, but it remained unclear if there was any action being taken to curtail the Mapp administration's effort. And Mr. Molloy, though it remained unclear as to where he stands on the issue from a personal standpoint, seemed determined to carry out the mandate given to him by territory's leader.

Feature Image: Bureau of Information Technology, St. Croix

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