

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Full Senate Approves Bill Giving New Health Commissioner Higher Pay Without Prompting Automatic Increases Elsewhere

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ST. THOMAS -- Senators on Friday approved a bill the Mapp administration says will help the local government recruit expert assistance through the Intergovernmental Personnel Mobility Act (I.P.A.), to temporarily cover “hard to fill” positions.

Simply put, the bill, [no. 31-0317](#), makes room for the local government to hire federal employees on a short-term basis. These federal employees, while working for the local government, would retain their employment with the federal government -- along with their salaries -- and receive a matching salary locally, without automatically increasing

the salary of the lowest paid cabinet member of the territory's government.

The first federal official who stands to benefit from the measure is the [governor's pick to lead the territory's Department of Health](#), Dr. Michelle S. Davis, a high-rated U.S. Department of Health and Human Services official, currently on loan to the territory for two years, according to Mr. Mapp, speaking during his January 25 State of the Territory address.

When asked on Friday if the measure was being introduced specifically because of the Davis hire, testifier Attorney General Claude Walker said it was not. "It's not some special legislation for her," he said.



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Michelle S. Davis

"Where are we in relation to the negotiation aspect?" Mr. James asked. "We're not living in a vacuum here. We know what's going on here."

Mr. Walker could not respond directly, and said it was a situation that would need further inquiry, "because it's not within my purview to have these types of negotiations concerning bringing on cabinet members. I'm not part of that."

And Mr. Walker seemed to struggle explaining certain portions of the bill, prompting Mr. James -- who wound up supporting the measure, stating that it appeared to be a mechanism to protect the government's treasury -- to praise the democratic process of committee hearings, special ordering measures and other indelible processes of government.

The territory has utilized the I.P.A. before, Senator Novelle Francis pointed out. He then asked Mr. Walker for further clarification as to what this particular measure was attempting to do. Mr. Walker said that currently, the salaries of the territory's deputy inspector general, inspector general and the Virgin Islands National Guard adjutant general, are tied to the lowest paid cabinet member. So if Dr. Davis were to be approved by the Senate as commissioner of D.O.H. -- with a salary of what Senator Kurt Vialet said he was told was around \$159,000, and could increase to about \$200,000 after benefits -- the salaries of the adjutant general, the deputy inspector general and the inspector general would increase as well if the Senate failed to act.

"Concurrently the salaries would have to go up for the deputy inspector general, the inspector general and the adjutant general. So we're addressing that [in this bill]," Mr. Walker said.

Mr. Francis wanted know whether the salaries of those positions increased when the I.P.A. was used to hire a former police commissioner. Mr. Potter said he was not sure when the law tying the salaries of the inspector general to the lowest paid government cabinet member was enacted. The D.O.P. director did, however, attempt to allay Mr. Francis' concern by stating that the measure before the Senate was an effort to prevent the automatic increase from happening whenever a federal employee is hired by the local government -- many of whom are paid well over \$100,000 annually.

Asked by Senator Almando Liburd if they knew the details of Dr. Davis' contract with the government, the testifiers said they did not.

The bill was passed 9-5, with Senators Vialet, Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, Jean Forde, Liburd, Kenneth Gittens, Francis, Clifford Graham, Sammuel Sanes and James voting yes. Senators Positive Nelson (Mr. Nelson legally changed his name earlier this year), Myron Jackson, Justin Harrian, Janette Millin Young and Tregenza Roach voted no. Senator Marvin Blyden is out of the territory.

Feature Image: Michelle S. Davis

Image Credit: HSS.