

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bert Bryan And Arturo Watlington Were Cause Of 2014 Election Chaos, Neville James Says

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ST. THOMAS -- If you can remember anything about 2014 in the territory, coming to the forefront of your mind without amnesia would be the chaotic elections, with countless fighting between the St. Croix and St. Thomas-St. John districts boards of elections.

According to Senator Neville James, the problems were caused by two men: former St. Croix district Board Chairman Bert Bryan and Joint Board of Elections Chairman Arturo Watlington, Jr.

"The players on the boards of elections are the problem. We keep acting as if we've had one board, or two boards, or three boards -- what about performance? What about the

players? Who is to say the structure is bad? We've been electing for years, why now the boards need to be unified? Because 2014 was the fiasco that it was? It was the players involved," Mr. James offered, visibly irate.

He then went straight to his point: "Maybe you guys don't want to call out Bert Bryan because he likes to call radio stations and target people. And Arturo Watlington because he likes to push up his face when he sees you, but Bert Bryan and Arturo Watlington were the problem with the 2014 election. And I hope the recorder made it clear that Neville James said that, because that's my position and none of them can't do me nothing," Mr. James declared.

Mr. James said those things during Friday's Committee of the Whole session, when senators were discussing a Senator Kenneth Gittens-sponsored bill that sought to amend Virgin Islands code to merge all three boards of elections — St. Croix District board, St. Thomas-St. John District board and the Joint Board of Elections — into one system that would simply be called the Board of Elections; governing the entire territory.

The bill was held in committee as senators sought further clarification.

During a Committee of Rules and Judiciary hearing [last month](#), details of the measure caused some concern among testifiers, including St. Croix district Board Member Raymond Williams, who said some parts of the measure may be unconstitutional. There was also opposition from former Delegate to Congress Donna M. Christensen, who agreed that the process needed to be streamlined, but said it should be done by the Joint Board of Elections "under the structure that currently exists."

"It is important that the concerns and positions of the voters of both districts be adequately represented and this would allow for that. However, we cannot have elections run one way in St. Thomas and another in St. Croix. We are one territory and the elections are territorial," Ms. Christensen said in a written testimony document provided to The Consortium.

But at yesterday's hearing, senators unleashed a barrage of criticism at current board members, labeling the system as dysfunctional and expensive. Senator Kurt Vialet, for example, contended that the bill was needed immediately, because "we have had two disjointed boards for a long period of time."

"I think everything possible has been tried to get those two boards to work together, and as recent as a week and a half ago, you saw where decisions were made that were not [in] unison," Mr. Vialet said. The freshman Democrat was referring to a recent correspondence from the St. Croix board stating that the parties needed to pay for their own elections, while the St. Thomas board held a different stance. And a teleconference between the two boards turned awry when one side turned off the audio. "It's just been on and on with the dysfunction that is going on," he said.

The cause of consternation among those who opposed the measure at the Rules hearing in January pertains to how it was constructed. An amendment to the [original bill](#), offered by Mr. Gittens, sees the new board including 9 members — three elected from St. Thomas, four from St. Croix, one from St. John and one elected territory-wide — who can be a resident from either district. And the measure says that no more than two members

from a political party may represent either district under the amendment Mr. Gittens added. The bill also kept in place the staggered manner through which board members are elected.

Remembering the chaotic and oftentimes unorganized elections process of 2014, Mr. Gittens said his bill was aimed at simplifying and unifying the territory's elections system. And the trimming of the board from the current Joint Board of Elections amount of 14 to his proposal of 9, is part of the second-term Democrat's effort to make elections in the territory a more straightforward process. Making his case, Mr. Gittens said across the U.S., where election boards serve millions, the largest board he's seen consists of only 11 members.

Even so, the measure was held in committee 8-6, with senators Gittens, Violet, Sammuel Sanes, Jean Forde, Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly and Francis voting in the affirmative, while senators Tregenza Roach, Positive Nelson, Myron Jackson, Justin Harrigan, Sr., Almando Liburd, Janette Millin Young, Clifford Graham and James voted against.

Other bills approved on Friday include the following: