

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill Making It More Difficult To Run For Public Office Approved By Rules Committee

Politics / **Published On March 11, 2016 10:44 AM /**

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ST. THOMAS -- Members of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary on Thursday favorably forwarded a multitude of bills to the full Senate, among them bill no. 31-0278, that ups the difficulty in running for public office by increasing the number of signatures needed from the flat amount of 50 to 250 for governor, lieutenant governor and delegate to Congress, 200 for senators and 100 for other elected positions.

Senator Kenneth Gittens, the bill's chief sponsor and chairman of the Rules committee, asked testifier Caroline Fawkes, Elections System supervisor, for the last count of voters registered to the various parties and those without any affiliation in the territory. According to Ms. Fawkes, at last count, there were 14,416 Democrats in St. Thomas, 88

in St. John and 15,259 in St. Croix. Those registered as Republicans numbered 614 in St. Thomas, 55 in St. John and 1,113 in St. Croix. The Independent Citizens Movement had 592 in St. Thomas, 66 in St. John and 776 in St. Croix. And citizens with no affiliation numbered 6,495 in St. Thomas, 5,370 in St. Thomas, and 87 in St. John.

After hearing the numbers, Mr. Gittens suggested that the figures solidified the measure's importance. "All establishing that they can meet those increased numbers that we spoke of," he said.

While most Democrats supported the measure, Senator Janette Millin Young opposed it, arguing that she wanted people to be encouraged to join the political process, not intimidated by the entry requirements. And Senator Tregenza Roach, an independent and non-committee member, rebuked the measure as undemocratic.

"I think we shouldn't be thinking about reducing the number of people who run for office," Mr. Roach began. "I ran twice, and I thought myself well qualified to be a senator for the district of St. Thomas-St. John. I thought I knew enough people, I thought enough people were familiar with my public work, my education, my involvement in the community -- I thought of all that. I got all my signatures, filed my papers, my residency and everything was in order, but I lost. Twice. Because the test is not getting onto the ballot, the test is getting people to vote for you. And I don't believe it's a democratic principle to be reducing either the opportunities for people to run, or in any way limiting people's access to get on the ballot."

Citing the numbers that Ms. Fawkes gave, Mr. Roach pointed out that the ability for a Republican candidate to amass 200 signatures out of 614 registered members in St. Thomas is near impossible. "That's one-third of the people registered to that party to sign your petition to even get on the ballot," he said. "In these times when we need leadership in our communities, we don't want to discourage people from running."

He later added that voters set the criteria for who they want to select, "and we should not make it more difficult for people to get on the ballot." Mr. Roach also noted the built-in advantage that sitting senators have, as they're always in the view of residents via various forms of media, which gives an indirect political advantage to campaign "all year," he said.

"But that person out there may have an idea about getting this government moving, [and] if we make it harder for them, we've extended the period of time that people have to go on leave. And I think we have to think about whether, in a small place, we're going to benefit from making it more difficult for people to run."

Even so, the bill was passed and forwarded to the full Senate for its decision on the matter, with all members of the committee, bar Sen. Janette Millin Young, voting yes. Senator Justin Harrigan Sr. was absent.

The senators also approved a bill that seeks to eliminate voting for a full slate of candidates of one party by checking the party's symbol. Instead, the new law would place a symbol of the party from which the candidates hail next to their names, which proponents contend would simplify the process, and give voters more flexibility in voting for singular candidates, as compared to checking a symbol and voting for a full slate of

candidates -- even if you don't support some.

The issue of symbol voting came to a head after the November 2014 elections, which was marred by accusations of disenfranchisement, and chaos at virtually every board of elections meeting in both districts. Because of symbol voting, over 1,000 ballots were spoiled in 2014; even as there were less than 500 symbol voters during the 2014 elections, according to Ms. Fawkes.

Mrs. Millin Young was the only senator who voted against the measure, and Mr. Harrigan was absent.

The committee also approved a bill that disqualifies and fines -- between \$500 - 5,000 -- elected officials who vote in other U.S. jurisdictions. And it approved a bill that automatically disqualifies members of two different parties from running for office on the same ticket, which is needed, according to its chief sponsor Mr. Gittens, to prevent confusion.

The bill was birthed after former Judge Soraya Diase-Coffelt, an independent candidate, ran for governor of the territory with John Canegata, the chairman of the territory's Republican party, as her lieutenant governor pick. The Elections System sued Judge Diase-Coffelt and won locally. However, the former judge carried the case all the way to the U.S. Third Circuit Court in Philadelphia, and ultimately won her bid to be on the ballot.

She, of course, lost the General Election to Kenneth Mapp and Osbert Potter, placing third behind former Delegate to Congress Donna Christensen and her pick for lieutenant governor Basil Ottley.