

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill Appropriating Over \$19 Million For Salary Increases Passes Finance Committee

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ST. THOMAS -- A bill that allocates over \$19 million to various government departments and agencies to fund the pay increases promised by Governor Kenneth Mapp in January, has been approved by members of the Committee on Finance, chaired by Senator Clifford Graham, during a meeting held at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall on Monday.

The bill's fate will soon be determined by the full body, but it is expected to breeze through. In fact, senators' main concern at yesterday's meeting was the speed in which the funds would be dispersed to government employees. Mapp administration officials, including Director of Personnel Milton Potter, said that once the bill has cleared the full Senate, Personnel would direct the affected government departments and agencies to

begin processing Notice of Personnel Action (NOPAs) for employees. Mr. Potter added that the first batch of increases could go out by April.

Senators were also concerned about the sustainability of the salary increases, with Sen. Janette Millin Young asking bluntly how the administration intended to maintain the increases once the \$32 million remaining from the sale of the former HOVENSA facility to ArcLight Partners, LLC, is depleted.

Office of Management and Budget Director Nellon Bowry said the government's plan is to increase revenue, but he was chastised by Mrs. Millin Young, who noted that the same employers who hire residents that wound up paying taxes to the government, were the same firms that Governor Kenneth Mapp has taken adversarial stances with. Mrs. Millin Young pointed to hotel establishments that were terminating employees because their Economic Development Commission benefits had been discontinued by the governor.

"You say that if we do nothing, [the government's] \$100 million structural debt will grow, but how about if you do nothing is one thing, but if you do things to worsen is something else," Mrs. Millin said. Mr. Potter had noted that the government's annual budget shortfall sat between \$100-110 million annually. She said the administration was not working hard enough to reconcile its differences with the hotels. That would include, according to Mrs. Millin Young, sitting at the table, "and not be adversarial to the very entities that put money and bring revenues to the territory."

The [bill](#) seeks to amend Act no. 7758 — [the fiscal year 2015-16 budget](#) — to make additional appropriations of \$5,585,081 for the Department of Education; \$2,469,363 for the Bureau of Corrections; \$2,238,353 for the Bureau of Internal Revenue; \$575,077 for the Division of Personnel; \$1,131,353 for the Office of the Lieutenant Governor; \$1,241,032 for the Virgin Islands Fire Service; \$2,176,283 for the Virgin Islands Police Department; \$275,860 for the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs; and \$3,526,739 for the Department of Human Services. When aggregated, the total amount equates to \$19,219,141.

The measure also funds shortfalls in D.O.E. and includes appropriations of \$2.8 million for the [beleaguered school lunch program](#); \$1.6 million for substitute teachers; \$600,000 for a K-3 literacy and mathematics intervention program, and \$125,000 to fund the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (J.R.O.T.C.) at the St. Croix Educational Complex.

Aside from the D.O.E. extra funding and pay increase appropriations, the bill asks for \$550,000 from the general fund for the Taxi Cab Commission, to cover operation costs for the commission's implementation of mandatory continuing education for taxi and tour operators as a condition for license renewal.

All members of the Committee on Finance voted in the affirmative on Monday. Senator Tregenza Roach was absent.