

The Virgin Islands Consortium

You Won't Be Qualified To Run For Office Without 100 Signatures If Bill Passed By Senate Is Approved By Mapp

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ST. THOMAS -- Senators on Wednesday approved a bill sponsored by Senator Kenneth Gittens that increases the amount of signatures needed to run for public office by 50. The [original bill](#) called for a jump from 50 to as much as 250, but with pressure mounting from dissenters who argued that the measure, more than anything else, disenfranchises residents interested in running for office, the number was decreased.

Among the supporters, Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, also a co-sponsor, who said that the process of getting signatures from residents was a way to validate candidates.

"Breaking the mold is change, and I know change is uncomfortable, but all of us were elected with at least 4,700 votes. So why are we so uncomfortable with soliciting 100 signatures," Mrs. O'Reilly said. "I think it validates the process and it makes us come in contact with 100 people whose hands we shake, whose pulse we feel, and whose blessing we get to seek the office. She later added that 50 additional signatures "isn't going to kill any of us."

But senators opposing the measure, including Janette Millin Young, held their ground.

"I truly believe that when we have turned in our petitions and when we have filed to run, that's when the campaign begins, she said. "And when the campaign begins, we go -- we sell ourselves as candidates. We shake those hands and we campaign."

Mrs. Millin Young said she did not understand why signatures were needed to begin with, "but if we must gather 50, I think 50 is enough. Don't we test the validity of that candidate on election day? she asked rhetorically.

The bill's sponsor said that senators who say the measure only works to block interested persons from running, burned his heart.

"I will not sit here as a member of this body and attempt to disenfranchise anyone," Mr. Gittens said on Wednesday. "This measure simply seeks to show the true and top earnestness of each candidate that submits a nomination to the Board of Elections."

His words were not enough to allay those concerned about the measure's impact on lesser known potential candidates, who may have to take time off from work to run for office.

"I will maintain my position: we should not make it more difficult for people to run for public office. They meet the criteria that are set out in the Virgin Islands Code, and if people want to vote for them, they vote for them," Senator Tregenza Roach said.

Senator Positive Nelson said increasing the number "doesn't make it a more prudent process," because most times candidates choose surrogates to do the soliciting for them. And Mr. Nelson, being at a disadvantage as a member of the Independent Citizens Movement -- a party with only 672 registered members on St. Croix -- said it was already hard enough collecting signatures.

"Most of these people are old, we have to get to their homes -- I'm telling you those 25 signatures is a task. And I'm a popular candidate, but I'm not elected by ICMers alone. So I think it's unfair to require that process at the beginning. So please, I'm asking for you all's consideration. I think it is inequitable and it's unfair," Mr. Nelson said.

The bill -- forwarded to governor Kenneth Mapp for his review -- was approved with senators Kurt Violet, Neville James, Clifford Graham, Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly, Mr. Gittens, Sammuel Sanes, Jean Forde and Novelle Francis voting in the affirmative. It was opposed by Marvin Blyden, Myron Jackson, Mr. Roach, Mrs. Millin Young, Justin Harrigan, Sr., Almando "Rocky" Liburd and Mr. Nelson.