

The Virgin Islands Consortium

'No Patience For Stupid Questions': J.F.L. Board Moves To Block Public From Meetings

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J.F.L. Board Chairman Troy De Chabert-Schuster.

ST. CROIX -- In an authoritarian move on Tuesday, the Juan F. Luis Hospital Board of Directors voted unanimously to give its executive committee -- which is made up of all board members -- the authority to "act in the full power and exercise the authority of the board." The motion was made member Philip Arcidi.

The move, authoritarian in nature, essentially blocks the public from meetings that are supposed to be open, while giving the board the power to make major decisions behind

closed doors. The Juan F. Luis Hospital is funded in great part by taxpayers, and the Government of the Virgin Islands recently financed its Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (C.M.S.) Systems Improvement Agreement [to the tune of \\$7 million](#).

In light of the board's decision, open board meetings -- formerly held monthly -- will now be conducted quarterly. But the executive committee will continue to meet; leaving very important decisions that could potential change the trajectory of healthcare in St. Croix to five people, who will be able to act without the public's knowledge.

According to Virgin Islands Code, all meetings of governmental agencies or their subdivisions authorized to take action on behalf of the agency shall be held in public. This means that the board's bold action on Tuesday was a clear violation of law.

Asked by The Consortium why the board moved in the direction it did, board Chairman Troy de Chabert-Schuster said the approved motion was in conformity with the bylaws of the board. "We didn't create those bylaws," he said.

Pressed further by a Consortium reporter, Mr. Schuster said the decision was made to streamline meetings, and reaffirmed that the public -- including media -- would not be allowed in the executive committee meetings.

The board had been holding executive meetings for weeks, where it would deliberate decisions and then present said decisions at the public meetings. With the hope of getting clarity on how the determination to block the public out of meetings came about, the Consortium asked Mr. Schuster who had first raised the idea. The board chairman, however, lost his composure.

"I don't have patience for stupid questions," he said. "Not tonight. You were sitting right here. You heard who made the motion." Pressed on whether the motion made on Tuesday by Mr. Arcidi was the first time that the board was hearing of barring the public from meetings, or whether those discussions were being had prior to the public meetings, Mr. Schuster did not respond.

The move takes J.F.L down a dangerous path. The hospital, still being watched closely by C.M.S., has been mired in a swamp of bad decisions that have left the hospital in a [management crisis](#). It's chief financial officer, Mr. Lessing, had resigned twice and [asked for a severance of \\$185,000](#). Mr. Lessing had promised not to pursue legal action against the struggling hospital once the requested severance pay was given. And Mr. Lessing worked at the hospital for an entire year without signing a contract, and only moved to do so under the tenure of Dr. Okolo as C.E.O., according to people with knowledge of the matter, who requested anonymity because they were not at liberty to speak to the media.

But there Mr. Lessing was, sitting at the table again on Tuesday -- a man who had resigned twice, asking for a severance pay of \$185,000, for reasons yet unknown to the public and of which Mr. Schuster said he was not at liberty to reveal.

The board, under the leadership of Mr. Schuster, had only recently given the C.E.O. position to Dr. Okolo, and had spoken highly to a Consortium reporter of Dr. Okolo's ability to do the job. Mr. Schuster had unflinchingly defended Dr. Okolo's annual salary of \$350,000 as well.

And although the hospital was able to fill the acting C.E.O. position with Mr. Evangelista, J.F.L. remains without a chief operating officer, chief nursing officer, chief medical officer and its chief financial officer position remains in question.

Feature Image: Troy de Chabert-Schuster (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC).

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