

The Virgin Islands Consortium

J.F.L. Board Votes To Keep Meetings Open To Public, Ban Bonus Pay

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ST. CROIX -- As reported by The Consortium [here](#) and [here](#) in separate interviews with Juan F. Luis Board Chairman Troy de Chabert-Schuster, the board moved on Tuesday to reverse a controversial decision that would have kept the public -- and the media -- out of board meetings, and it passed a myriad of motions aimed at fixing a public image tarnished in recent weeks following news that former CEO Ken Okolo and Tim Lessing, current chief financial officer, [had given themselves tens of thousands of dollars in bonuses](#) without the board's consent.

During the meeting, Mr. Schuster attempted to explain the board's unpopular public-banning motion, stating that there were no nefarious reasons for moving to hold meetings

in private. The Consortium [had noted](#) that the motion was authoritarian in nature and, more importantly, against Virgin Islands Code, which says all meetings of governmental agencies or their subdivisions authorized to take action on behalf of the agency shall be held in public. The board had decided that public meetings would be held only once every quarter, while decision-making meetings would be held in executive session behind closed doors.

"We're not trying to hide anything from the public; it was a way of streamlining," Mr. Schuster said. "There was never an intent to cover up anything or keep the public out. We were intending to report any actions taken during the executive committee meeting at the subsequent regular board meeting."

The motions, all of which were approved on Tuesday, include the following:

- No bonus will be negotiated nor awarded to any employee nor contract worker of the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center.
- No employee of the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center shall commence employment nor transfer to another assignment until all employment documents have been completed.
- All new hires of the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center must be approved by the Human Resources Committee of the Board and sent to the full Board for approval.
- Any wage or salary increase of more than 3% must be approved by the Human Resources Committee of the Board and sent to the full Board for approval.
- Motion to keep all board meetings in public.

They also voted to amend the hospital's bylaws in an attempt to ease the process of appointing a physician to the board. The hospital has had difficulty in appointing a physician because Virgin Islands Code bans the practice of appointing doctors to the board of the hospital in which they are employed. Dr. Ramesh Lakhram, medical staff director, said at the meeting that he had scoured the entire territory searching for a replacement of Dr. Anthony Ricketts, who left the board about a year ago, but could not find any. Dr. Lakhram said he spoke to Dr. Ricketts about temporarily holding the position until the law was amended -- something Senator Kurt Vialet, Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services chairman, agreed to look into -- but Dr. Ricketts had yet to respond.

Mr. Schuster made known yesterday that board member Joyce Heyliger, who represented nurses, had resigned two months after serving for six years. Mr. Schuster praised Ms. Heyliger, and said he wrote a letter to Charlene Jones, head of the nursing association, asking for guidance in finding a replacement.

Near the end of the meeting, board member Vera Falu motioned to have the hospital's acting CEO, Richard Evangelista, contact the Government of the Virgin Islands' Division of Personnel, to assist in the conducting of the description questionnaire of all J.F.L. employees, "that will trigger the reorganization/reassignment of personnel to the proper positions."

The motion was unanimously approved by the five board members present -- Ms. Falu, Mr. Schuster, Aracelis de Hendry-Walcott, Theresa Frorup-Ali and Philip Arcidi, the latter in attendance via telephone.

Mr. Schuster, fearing that the motion would bolster what he said were rumors that the hospital has been planning to layoff employees en masse, said the motion was not intended to fire anyone, but rather to streamline operations and become more efficient.

"We recognize that there may be some employees who are better suited in positions other than the position that they are in now, where they can work more effective, more efficiently," he said. "The board is not in the process of laying off any numbers of employees here. You know how the rumor mill goes, somebody starts it up and it just snowballs. We want the staff to be assured that we're not about to have any mass downsizing and jeopardize the livelihood of our people."

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