

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Unified Elections Board Comes Closer To Reality

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ST. CROIX -- The Committee on Rules and Judiciary, in a whirlwind hearing on Thursday, approved a bill unifying the separate boards of election into one Board of Elections. The legislation has made the rounds in the Senate, reaching [as far as the full body](#), but was sent back to committee for further review.

Those invited to testify held the same positions they did during prior meetings. St. Croix Board of Elections Chairwoman Lilliana Belardo de O'Neal said the board she leads stood in opposition, while Marvin Forbes, president of the VI Action Group, a watchdog organization that says its goal is to ensure fair elections in the territory, welcomed the unified board as a step in the right direction.

Senators had previously rejected the measure based on some concerns, among them language that decreased the membership from the current Joint Board of Elections number of 14 to 9 on the single board. Mr. Gittens agreed to increase the number to 13, so as to not create a situation where votes wound up tied, which would cause motions to fail. But that too was seen as an issue; and yet another idea to make the lieutenant governor serve on the board as a tie-breaker was ill-received.

Mr. Gittens amended the bill that sees membership on the single board matching the current 14 on the current Joint Board. The previous version of the bill that included nine members saw three elected members from St. Thomas, four from St. Croix, one from St. John and one elected territory-wide — who could be a resident from either district. But with the measure being amended to include 14 members, the result will likely mean four members of the Democratic party from each district being elected because of the islands' heavy Democratic base, with the remaining three seats per district being filled by candidates of other parties or those who are not associated with any group.

Stipends for board members during election counts would also be increased if the measure wins the full Senate and Governor Kenneth Mapp's approval. Regular board members would receive \$100 per day, up by \$15, while the chair would be paid \$150, up from \$100.

The measure was forwarded to the full body without opposition.

Another measure, [Bill No. 31-0356](#), making clear that a person must be domiciled in the territory to be eligible to vote, was forwarded to the full Senate as well.

Feature Image: Supporters of candidates campaign during the 2014 General Election cycle (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC).