

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Talk Achievements; Reveal Ongoing Search For New Building To House St. Croix Legislature

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ST. CROIX -- Senators who make up the 31st Legislature, specifically the St. Croix group of lawmakers, are in search of a building to house the legislative branch of government, Senator and President of the 31st Legislature Neville James said during a press conference held at The Palms at Pelican Cove on Friday.

The event, paid for by Mr. James, was not a candidacy announcement for himself, but rather an event held to highlight the works of the entire body over the last year and a half.

Mr. James went down the line reminding the public of the 31st Legislature's many achievements starting from early 2015, and its first confrontation with Governor Kenneth

Mapp over salary increases for his cabinet members, coming on the heels of the governor declaring that the territory was nearing the [brink of financial collapse](#).

After some back and forth and hand-wringing -- senators had twice voted down the Mapp cabinet members in protest of the salary increases -- [a compromise was reached](#) that saw most of them receiving a capped \$105,000 annual salary.

Mr. James recounted the difficult financial days of 2015, which came to a head during the summer months, and spoke of initiatives employed by the body -- [the use of anticipated property tax collections as a financing mechanism and the increased lines of credit](#) -- to curtail what could have turned into a major crisis.

And Mr. James, a seasoned politician well versed in matters of government, noted the 31st Legislature's support of the governor's offensive against HOVENSA, which [ultimately led to the current agreement with ArcLight Partners, LLC](#), now employing over 500 people, with a potential 500 more in the future once light refining commences.

The press conference was attended by Senators Kenneth Gittens, Kurt Vialet, Sammuell Sanes and Novelle Francis. Mr. James highlighted the positive outcomes for this island that came as a result of a unified front from the aforementioned lawmakers. He also lauded Mr. Vialet and Mr. Francis, the freshmen, for quickly transitioning into their new roles and passing effective legislation.

Mr. Vialet has emerged as a leader in the Senate, working on health, environment and education measures, while Mr. Francis, keeping inline with his background, has focused on initiatives aimed at the safety and security of residents.

Mr. James highlighted legislation affecting the Government Employees' Retirement System (G.E.R.S.) that he says did not save the pension system -- G.E.R.S. [needs an infusion of cash no less than \\$600 million to survive](#) -- but rather made changes to certain provisions within the measure that had in part led to this point.

So far, this year has proven to be productive 7 months in, according to Mr. James. "We've held sessions on a monthly basis up through June 29, notwithstanding our obligation to do so on a quarterly basis," he said.

As for the new building to house the Legislature, among other reasons, Mr. James said the current Fritz E. Lawaetz building in Frederiksted "just does not cut it." He said the building is old, and a new facility would lead to even more productivity because of the boost in morale that would accompany the up-to-date space. Mr. James pointed to Mr. Vialet who was the beneficiary of a brand new learning facility, the St. Croix Educational Complex, during his tenure as an educator, and the jolt in performance that followed.

The Senators, all Democrats, in September, 2015 were looking to purchase the former Innovative Building, now owned by St. Croix multimillionaire Warren Mosler, for \$5.9 million to house the Legislature. That plan backfired after a [report](#) on The Consortium, which included a letter to Mr. James from Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, lampooning the senators and asking that those monies be used instead to erect a facility to house the territory's mentally challenged.

"The people of the territory expect us to create jobs and to pass legislation that will positively impact and cure our societal ills. To consider spending millions of dollars to relocate the St. Croix legislature is simply appalling and a slap in the face to our constituents," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly, now a Democrat, wrote last year.

Mr. James said he would love to see all the current St. Croix lawmakers reelected into the 32nd Legislature, stressing the cohesion among them that he said has led to growth on this island.

Feature Image: From left to right: Senators Violet, Francis, James, Sanes and Gittens. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

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