

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Finance Committee Passes Over 30 Budget Bills Totaling Over \$784 Million For FY 2017

Government / **Published On September 11, 2016 11:29 AM /**

Staff **September 11, 2016**



ST. THOMAS -- The Senate Committee on Finance -- led by Senator Clifford Graham, above, who is serving his final few months as a senator with this year's budget process being the last he will oversee -- completed its markup process on Thursday at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall here and forwarded 35 budget bills to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.

With all departments and agencies added, as well as miscellaneous, the fiscal year 2017 budget totaled \$784.7 million. That's without items from smaller government branches and federal funding, which brings the total to [well over \\$1 billion](#).

Of the \$784.7 million amount, most departments and agencies received what was recommended by the governor, with the Office of the Governor being the standout exception, receiving \$9,951,245 instead of the recommended \$12.1 million, which was [\\$3 million more than what the governor requested last year](#). The governor had requested \$2 million as part of his office's 2017 budget to renovate executive offices, but that request was met with [stiff opposition](#) from senators.

And looking ahead -- with the territory's bonds suffering multiple downgrades, making borrowing more costly -- Senator Myron Jackson said 2017 will not be easy.

"I think that what all of us within our community is going to have to do is really be conscious of our ability and inability to properly fund and to sustain all that we want," Mr. Jackson said. "We're at a juncture where, if we don't get it right, disaster will befall us."

The Department of Education's budget was approved at \$167.1 million, \$139.2 of which is for payroll and benefits; the hospitals saw their budgets increased to a combined total of \$48.8 million -- \$25.5 million for the Schneider Hospital and \$23.3 million for the Juan F. Luis Hospital -- up from \$42.6 million the year before; the Virgin Islands Police Department's budget was approved at \$63.1 million, of which \$52.1 million is for payroll and benefits; the University of the Virgin Islands budget inched up by about \$2 million to \$31.8 million from \$29.9 million year-over-year; the Legislature's funding remained unchanged at \$21 million; Waste Management Authority stayed the same year-over-year at \$22.8 million; the Superior Court also stayed put at \$28.5 million; and the Supreme Court rose to \$6.6 million from last year's \$5.7 million.

The Department of Human Services, second largest after the Department of Education, also saw the greatest increase -- \$10 million -- seeing an appropriation of \$69 million, up from \$59.3 million the year before.

The miscellaneous section remained unchanged at \$37.4 million, the largest item of which is insurance for government employees.

As for Mr. Graham, senators universally praised him, some even mourn his impending exit, with Senator Kurt Vialet stating that the St. Thomas-St. John district was losing one of its best lawmakers.

"It's a bit sad to see that you're going, because I think that the St. Thomas/St. John district is losing a fine senator; somebody that has a full grasp of the issues, a full understanding and has really been an excellent team player. It's been a pleasure for me, in my first term on this committee, to work with Senator Clifford Graham," he said.

"I definitely want to echo the sentiments of the other senators with respect to the chairman, who has been the Finance chair in his four years as a Senator, and he has done a tremendous job in making sure that a fair process has been exercised, during not only the budget cycle, but throughout the four years," Senate President Neville James said.