The Virgin Islands Consortium

If You Have Multiple Phone Numbers, Expect To See $2 Surcharge On Each, If Bill Approved In Finance Committee Becomes Law

Business / **Published On November 16, 2016 09:32 AM /**

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ST. CROIX -- If you are paying for a family cellphone plan with multiple phone numbers, or have a business with multiple phone numbers, expect to see a surcharge of $2 on each number, if a bill sponsored by Senator Novelle Francis and approved by all but two senators who make up the Committee on Finance, becomes law.

The measure, Bill No. 31-0338, seeks to increase the telecommunications surcharge, which is used to help financially sustain the territory's emergency service agencies, from $1 to $2. The bill adds cellphones, Skype and Vonage to the statute, which originally only included landlines.

The Virgin Islands Fire Service, the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Health, received over $1 million combined last year from the current surcharge of $1, which only affected landlines: $300,000 for the Fire Service, $391,000 for V.I.T.E.M.A., $306,000 for D.O.H., and $121,000 for 911.

The bill was supported by all agencies represented at the hearing, held at the Fritz Lawaetz Legislative Hall here on Tuesday.

D.O.H. Commissioner Michelle Davis said the department was in need of extra funding for ambulance repairs and training, among other pressing needs. She also said D.O.H. pays emergency medical technicians over $500,000 in overtime every year, and the extra funding would be used to help cover costs.

Assistant V.I.T.E.M.A. Director, Allison Degazon, said the agency welcomed the extra funding because its emergency call centers are in need of upgrading with new technology to meet the demands of the 21st century. The upgrades would see V.I.T.E.M.A. receiving text messages from residents, among other important improvements.

"Without the ability to make the necessary improvements to the infrastructure of our emergency call center communication systems and software, our first responders and citizens will be limited to the level of real-time services available to them at a most [vulnerable] time in their lives," Mrs. Degazon said.

But during a point of clarification, Senator Tregenza Roach asked Public Services Commission Executive Director Donald Cole, what was his understanding of the how residents would be charged. Mr. Cole explained that the new measure would charge $2 per phone number, a response that helped guide Mr. Roach's -- and also Senator Positive Nelson's -- No votes. The measure, if passed as is, would see a family plan with six members paying an additional $12 monthly; and businesses with multiple numbers would see notable increases in their phone bills as well.

Mr. Roach then asked Office of Management and Budget Director, Nellon Bowry, whether auditing was conducted to ascertain that the monies were being used for their intended purposes, Mr. Bowry said he was not sure.

There was no amendment to limit the amount of phone numbers per household or business that would see the surcharge, and the bill was voted favorably by Senators Kurt Vialet, Mr. Francis, Marvin Blyden, Myron Jackson and Clifford Graham. Mr. Roach and Mr. Nelson voted against the measure.

Following the vote, Mr. Francis could be heard praising his fellow Democrats: "Thank you guys, that's the way a majority works," he said, referring to the Democratic majority in the Senate.

The measure will have to face the Committee and Rules and Judiciary, and then the full body, before it could be forwarded to Governor Kenneth Mapp.

Also forwarded out of the Committee on Finance, was Bill No. 31-0353, sponsored by Senator Kenneth Gittens, which seeks to reroute monies to the Government Employees' Retirement System, obtained from rent the government receives from the properties it now owns that once belonged to HOVENSA. The homes, about 80 units, are being rented to Limetree Bay Terminals, which rents the units to its employees at $1,352 monthly on two-year lease agreements. The bill, Mr. Gittens says, would bring G.E.R.S. an extra $1.3 million annually.

But GERS Administrator Austin Nibbs saw little use for the funds, noting that the pension system's unfunded liability was an astronomical $1.3 billion and quickly rising. And Mr. Bowry said the homes need to be maintained, and the best way to do so, he argued, was through monies the properties make.

Mr. Vialet suggested using at least 40 percent for maintenance and 60 percent for G.E.R.S. And Mr. Graham altogether relegated the effort, stating that the bill was like "bailing out a dinghy with a teaspoon."

The measure was nonetheless favorably voted out of committee 7-0, with hopes that it will be amended once it arrives in the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.