The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill That Sought To Increase Communications Surcharge From $1 To $2 Dies In Committee

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ST. THOMAS -- A bill sponsored by Senator Novelle Francis that would have in some instances drastically increased the cellphone bills of V.I. residents, was killed in the Committee on Rules and Judiciary on Thursday, following a Consortium report last month that highlighted the new charge.

The measure, Bill No. 31-0338, sought to increase the telecommunications surcharge which is used to help financially sustain the territory's emergency service agencies, from $1 to $2.

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: $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 the hearings.

But during a point of clarification when the measure was being heard last month, Senator Tregenza Roach asked Public Services Commission Executive Director Donald Cole, what was his understanding of 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 last month in the Committee on Finance. If the measure had passed, a family cellphone plan with six members would wind up costing an additional $12 monthly; and businesses with multiple numbers would see notable increases on 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.

On Thursday, Mr. Francis stood by his measure, recalling the importance of the funds while he served as police commissioner in years past. "This funding has been very, very necessary for EMS as well as the the Fire Department in some of those initiatives, with equipment and supplies that was needed to improve the level of service that they provide to this community," he said. Mr. Francis had hoped to introduce an amendment that would allocate 50 percent of the funds to VITEMA.

However, the legislation's fragile standing was further eroded on Thursday when Senator Janette Millin Young said she would not support a bill that sought to add yet another tax burden on residents, while the territory has yet to get a handle on its finances -- and even as Governor Kenneth Mapp continues spend lavishly on luxuries.

"Obviously one of our jobs here at the Legislature is to find ways to generate revenue, and certainly this measure attempts to do just that. My problem with it is that, overall, we don't have a handle on our finances, and every time we turnaround, there's a call for either a tax increase or borrowing, and so we have to come together and figure out which direction we want to head into," Mrs. Millin Young said. She said the first bill requesting the $1 hike was introduced as a temporary measure, however, "today, we're asking to increase a tax on a temporary measure for a basic necessity."

All of this while "monies are being taken into so many directions to satisfy luxuries for those in the upper echelon," Mrs. Millin Young added. "Whether it's a vehicle, whether it's where we live, whether it's all of that." She said she pays her own rent and drives her own vehicle.

Voting in support of the bill were Senators Justin Harrigan, Sr. and Mr. Francis. Senators Kenneth Gittens and Millin Young voted against. Senators Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, Neville James and Jean Forde were absent. The outcome essential kills the bill, as it will not get another chance to be heard in the 31st Legislature.