

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Francis Finds Way To Revive Telephone Surcharge Increase Bill, Says 'It's Only A Dollar'

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Ernice Gilbert **December 22, 2016**



ST. THOMAS -- A bill that in some instances could drastically increase the cellphone bills of V.I. residents, was revived in the full Senate on Tuesday and approved by ten senators on Wednesday.

[Bill No. 31-0508](#) -- An Act relating to the emergency services surcharge, sponsored by Senator Novelle Francis, was stubbornly brought back into session by Senate Democrats [even after being killed in the Committee on Rules and Judiciary](#) just days earlier.

The measure, if signed into law by Governor Kenneth Mapp, will increase the telecommunications surcharge from \$1 to \$2 to help financially sustain the territory's

emergency service agencies. 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. If the measure is approved, 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.

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. But senators who support the increase contend that the \$1 million is not enough to meet the emergency needs.

At the session yesterday, supporters of the measure lashed out at the idea that the \$1 dollar increase should not be footed by residents. Mr. Francis said residents complaining about the measure are the same ones with \$700 cellphones. "I'm asking you for a dollar; people are buying \$700 cellphones. Every person we meet in this community has a cellphone regardless of their status. We're simply asking them to give up an additional dollar to support their emergency services," he said. Mr. Francis said his support for the measure stems from his years at the Virgin Islands Police Department, where he served as officer, police chief and commissioner. "I knew of the benefit of having that simple dollar coming into the Police Department," he said.

Senator Kurt Violet also spoke emotionally about the measure, contending that an extra dollar was insignificant compared to the cellphone bills residents pay. Mr. Violet and outgoing Senate President Neville James, mentioned the current, high expense of cellphones and how residents had no qualms paying, as justification enough to move forward with the \$2 taxation.

"While it's popular to stand here in this body and say, 'no, let's not do it, we're taxing the people again,' the same individuals, when they go for an upgrade, when they want to switch their phone from a 5 to a 6 or a 7, they agree to pay \$25 extra a month for three years in order to finance the cost of the phone, and they don't complain," Mr. Violet said.

But not all senators were in support of the measure. Mr. Roach said relegating the extra dollar as insignificant was neglecting how difficult it is for some residents to make ends meet.

"I was very pleased when the measure did not move out of the Rules Committee, and I was surprised when it came back to us yesterday," he said. "Now, to some of us it's a dollar, but we ought to remember that there are government employees in particular, if we look at just that group, who struggle from day to day, who had the option of going to the Government Employees' Retirement System and borrowing money against their money to meet their responsibilities, and that has been taken away from them."

The increase will apply to cellphones, landlines and even voice over internet protocol services such as Vonage and Skype. Mr. Roach said senators may contend that the extra funds are needed by the emergency services, but he challenged them to find the funds elsewhere, just as they do for other measures that they support.

"[Just as] we could find some of the resources to support the projects that we want to move forward, is the same way we could have responded to that without putting another tax on the people of the Virgin Islands," Mr. Roach said.

He added: "I remember coming into the supermarket and having people thank me for a simple measure as that, saying, 'Yes, I'm glad the Legislature didn't pursue it.' So I'm not going to support it."

Mr. Francis responded by stating, "Those same individuals who will walk up to you in the grocery store and talk about, 'Oh, I'm glad you didn't increase,' those same individuals -- three times that amount -- blaze us every single day when ambulance isn't working. They blaze us. A dollar is not too much to ask," he said.

The bill passed and will be forwarded to the governor for his approval or veto.

Voting Yea were Senators Marvin Blyden, Francis, Clifford Graham, Justin Harrigan, Sr., Myron Jackson, James, Almando Liburd, Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, Sammuel Sanes and Violet.

Voting No were Kenneth Gittens, Positive Nelson, Roach and Janet Millin Young. Senator Jean Forde was absent.