

The Virgin Islands Consortium

In Rowdy Senate Session, Senators Keep Unified Elections Board Law, Fund (Where Funds Are Available) Special Election

Politics / **Published On February 22, 2017 11:42 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **February 22, 2017**



ST. THOMAS -- Yesterday's Senate session called to either replace or amend the bill that unified the board of elections, and another to fund the upcoming April 8 special election in light of the Senate seat left vacant following the [Kevin Rodriguez saga](#), exposed a rift between the majority caucus made up of Democrats, and the minority, made up of four independent lawmakers and Janette Millin Young, a Democrat.

The [minority caucus](#) is of the opinion that the Legislature should seat Mr. Rodriguez.

"Our legal counsel has made it clear that the decision about the qualifications of senator elect to serve in the 32nd Legislature is a matter for the Legislature. So not only did they not respect our counsel and the integrity of our body, they now have us funding a special election which we do not need and in a time when we have no funding to do so," Positive Nelson, a minority member, said in a release the caucus issued following the hearing. Other minority senators include Dwayne DeGraff, Tregenza Roach and Alicia Hansen.

Tempers flew during the entire session, with Mrs. Hansen, who has a history of contention during her years as a Senator, getting into a back and forth with Senate President Myron Jackson, at one point telling Mr. Jackson that he was allowing his colleagues to control him. Mrs. Hansen also called for point of order several times and would begin speaking, but was shutdown multiple times by Mr. Jackson because a point of order, as Mr. Jackson explained, was to point out that a rule had been broken, and Mrs. Hansen failed to identify broken rules.

Mrs. Millin Young called out the majority for failing to take action relative to Mr. Rodriquez, lashing out at her Democrat colleagues for what she said was Governor Kenneth Mapp's influence over them, and, in turn, over the Legislature.

"I'm sick and tired of Governor Mapp running this place. He hasn't lost one vote in this place, no matter how many protesters go out there and fight," Mrs. Millin Young said. "So I would rather this institution address the resolution that the minority put together, than to vote on passing monies for a special election that we can't afford and, I don't know, maybe I missed it, where is the money coming from?" Mrs. Millin Young was referring to a resolution from the minority caucus that would see the 32nd Legislature seating Mr. Rodriquez, but it was not taken up by the body, which is controlled by Senate Democrats under the leadership of Mr. Jackson.

On the measure concerning the unified election board, instead of repealing the law, senators voted to approve a subsequent measure aimed at correcting discrepancies in the current law. Corrections include directing the St. Thomas-St. John Board of Elections to conduct the April 8 election; putting off the unification of both district boards into one board until July 31; clarifying that current board members would automatically become members of the unified board (St. Thomas Board Chairman Arturo Watlington had argued that this was not possible since the members were elected in separate districts. However, he was challenged by Attorney General Claude Walker who cited two instances where U.S. courts sided with state Legislatures that abolished commissions and replaced them with new entities, with members of the former commissions serving on the newly-created organizations. Mr. Watlington, as well as the Senate's legal counsel who sided with Mr. Watlington on the issue, failed to identify a single precedent for their opinion). The measure also directs the new, unified board of elections to convene business -- including the establishment of its rules as well as the election of its officers -- by August 1.

On the measure to fund the April 8 election, Elections Supervisor Caroline Fawkes said the original request from the system could be reduced by \$40,000, bringing final projection to \$100,000, based on certain steps she said the system will take to save money. There remains no clear funding source, however, so language in the amended bill reads, "from any available source."

The amended bill passed; the minority caucus was in favor of repealing the board unification law altogether, which would eliminate the need for a special election and the \$100,000.

Voting in support of the amended measures were Senators Kurt Vialet, Neville James, Marvin Blyden, Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, Brian Smith, Sammuel Sanes, Jean Forde, Novelle Francis and Jackson. Voting against the measures were Millin Young, Nelson, Hansen, Roach and DeGraff.

© Viconsortium 2026