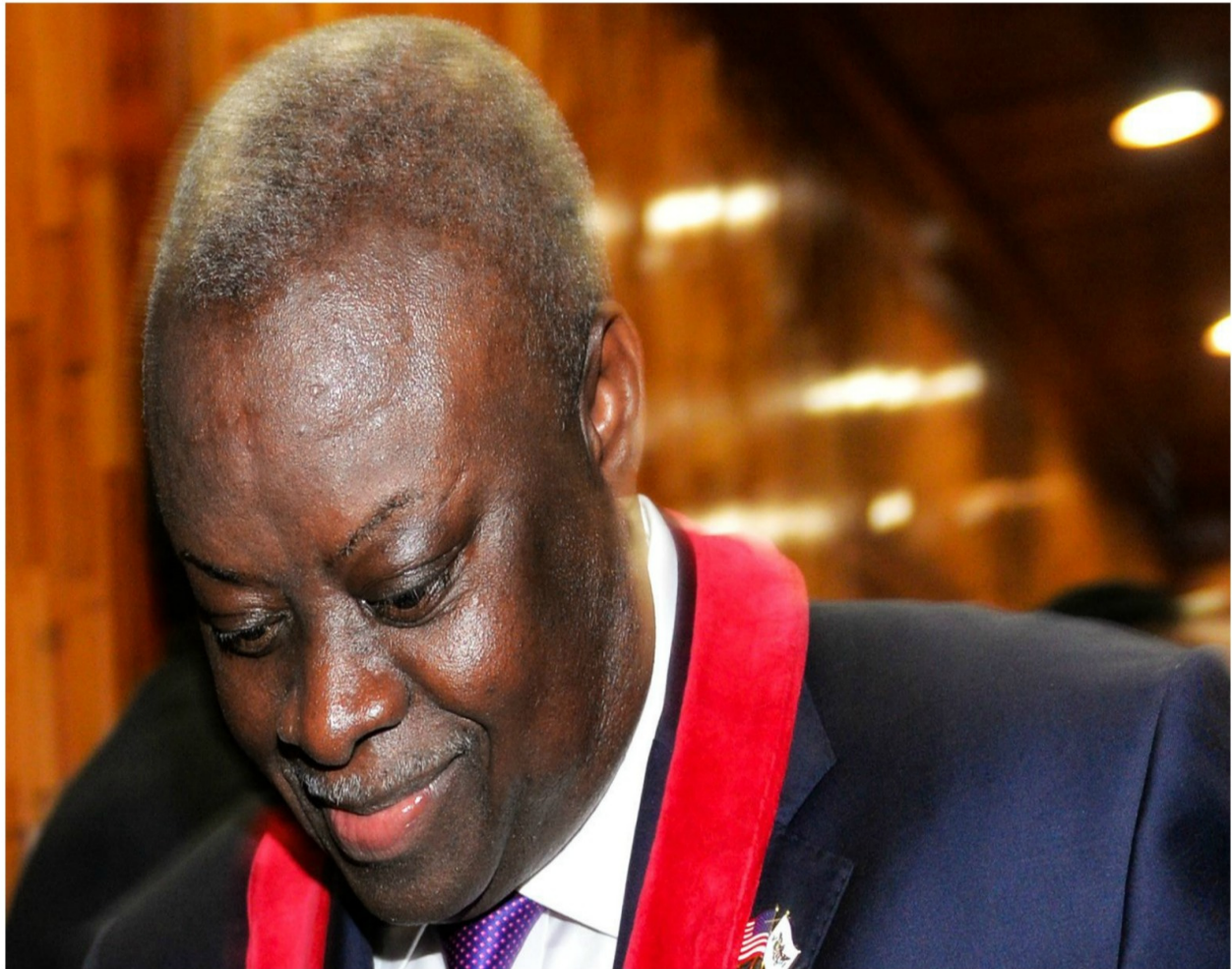


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Hold Mapp Bills In Committee, Including JFL Sewage Repairs Funding Measure

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ST. Thomas -- Frustration and incredulity marked a Senate hearing in the Committee on Finance on Thursday, where a number of Governor Kenneth Mapp's special session measures were heard, and where it was the hope of the Mapp administration that the bills would be given the greenlight and eventually be forwarded to Mr. Mapp's desk for approval.

But the hearing saw lawmakers holding all but one of the measures in committee, with the only measure that passed being Bill No. 32-0088, which provides for the reprogramming of funds appropriated from the Community Facilities Trust Account for certain capital projects through the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation. The

funds, \$75,000 in total, will go towards repairs at multiple facilities, including the Joseph Aubain Ballpark, the Emile Griffith Ballpark, and the Kerwin Terrace Ballpark. The bill was sent to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further vetting.

The measures held were [Bill No. 32-0087](#), which seeks to authorize the local government, through the Department of Property and Procurement, to purchase additional land as part of Paul E. Joseph Stadium construction; [Bill No. 32-0089](#), which seeks to reprogram Matching Funds Revenue bonds (rum cover-over funds) to finance maintenance of certain Department of Education (D.O.E.) non-school support facilities, as well as school facilities in need of repair; [Bill No. 32-0090](#), which would increase the Department of Human Services' appropriation for the fiscal year ending September 2017, to acquire a nursing home, as well as increasing the local Medicaid match to \$10 million; [Bill No. 32-0091](#), which aims to collect \$3 million for Juan F. Luis Hospital sewage repairs from any funds available through the Gross Receipt Tax bonds, Matching Fund bonds, or the Community Facilities Trust account. The same bill requests another \$13 million from rum cover-over funds that is collected through the Internal Revenue Matching Fund, made possible by the adjustment of the rum cover-over rate from \$10.50 per proof gallon to \$13.25 per proof gallon in fiscal year 2016. The bill also seeks an additional \$2 million for the General Fund from the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund.

The other bill held was a measure that seeks to appropriate about half a million to the Schneider Regional Medical Center for piping and water system repairs.

On Paul E. Joseph Stadium, Public Works Commissioner Gustav James responses did not satisfy lawmakers who were curious to understand why the project hadn't started, and why the extra land was needed in the first place.

"Wait a minute, we are changing the orientation of a park, and in order to change it we have to acquire land (5.5 acres), and we don't even really have a good justification as to why we need to push it that far back that we need to purchase land with all the surrounding land to the front of the property," Senator Kurt Vialet said.

Mr. Vialet also asked whether the funds authorized to complete the project, which Mr. James said was \$17 million as \$3 million out of the \$20 million originally budgeted for the job had been expended, Mr. James said, "No, the monies can only complete different phases of the project but it is not enough to finish it entirely."

On funds for repairs at D.O.E. facilities totaling \$732,000, senators weren't clear about how exactly the funds would be expended after testimony given by D.O.E. Commissioner Sharon McCollum, appeared to vary in language from what was on the bill.

Department of Human Services Commissioner, Felecia Blyden, whose department would see the bulk of the appropriations -- eventually totaling \$10 million for Medicaid matching funds -- testified that if the government does not make available between \$2 million and \$3 million immediately, and a final amount of \$10 million in following months, the local government could lose the federal Medicaid match.

"Without an increase in appropriations, the MAP program will be forced to cease all Medicaid payments until the new fiscal year begins Oct. 1 2017," Ms. Blyden warned.

The \$3 million from J.F.L. would come from unspent bonds monies from a variety of sources. But that item is tied to the bill seeking a total of \$18.6 million -- some of which would be taken from \$7 million in the Internal Revenue Matching Bond fund -- monies already set aside annually for the struggling Government Employees' Retirement System.

Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly complained that Mapp administration officials did not seem overly concerned about the territory's needs. She, along with multiple others lawmakers, expressed disbelief that projects with funding set aside had for years not seen substantial progress, among them the Paul E. Joseph Stadium and road work through the \$100 million in GARVEE bonds.

"I'm going to drop the anchor here because people are living in this territory in a very depressed state, they are hopeless" Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said. "We see the lack of urgency from the officials in government, and a lot of talk and very little action...

She continued, "It's not looking good, governor. It isn't looking good when this body, almost two years ago gave you almost \$100 million for GARVEE bonds and we're still driving on roads that leave a lot to be desired. Roads get paved, then they get cut up, then they get patched, then they destroy people's cars -- to include the very same cars we buy for the government. We build a \$26 million library on St. Thomas, it is now announced that it is closed because it needs a chiller. Even before that the roof needed to be replaced. What are we doing? Who are we engaging to do these things? Folks, are you falling asleep? Do you not see? Because I see...

"...I have a job to do, and I'm telling you that you are not showing me that you really are in tune with the needs of the people we represent. You're not," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said.

Senator Samuel Sanes, he too exasperated by the lack of construction at Paul E. Joseph, said, "We're here to discuss the Paul E. Joseph Stadium again, hopefully we'll see the light at the end of the tunnel, and not a train in our way."

The senators were also armed with a post auditor's report that recommended against the spending, citing a government strapped for cash. The lawmakers -- who themselves had more concerns about the measures -- voted unanimously to hold the bills in committee, at least for now. Furthermore, the post auditor's report says the request for additional spending does not help the current fiscal problems being faced by the local government. It says a government that is not able to print its own money should not, especially in a fiscal crisis, expand federal programs.

Correction: May 19, 2017

A previous version of this story, because of a text error, included a wrong dollar amount sought by the Dept. of Education. It's \$732,000, not \$732,136,000. The story has been updated to reflect the correct information.