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Rules Committee Advances Bill to Alter WAPA Board; Bill Designating St. Croix South Shore Free Trade Zone Also Approved

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During a Thursday Committee on Rules and Judiciary hearing, lawmakers approved Bill 33-0210, an Act that establishes a minimum educational criteria for the Virgin Islands Water Authority Governing Board, and changed its number of membership capacity from 9 to 7.

This change followed last Friday's hearing in the Committee of the Whole, called by Senator Kenneth Gittens to welcome discussion on Bill No. 33-0346, a measure proposed to dismantle the existing board and replace it with a Management and Oversight Review Committee for a minimum of three years.

Originally the requisite section of Virgin Islands Code did not outline minimum background qualifications for W.A.P.A. board members. It simply stated requirements relative to the number of board members, specifics on appointment by jurisdiction and governmental affiliation or lack thereof, and terms of service.

The latest bill states that any appointed board member must have a background in one of the following fields:

- Engineering, Power Generation, Energy or Natural Resources Conservation;
- Economics, Accounting, Finance; or
- Public Affairs or Law

“This legislation changes the actual composition of the [W.A.P.A.] board and also seeks to ensure that we have nominees who are better qualified to serve in this critical capacity,” said primary co-sponsor Gittens. He said the authority continues to provide unreliable service and high rates to residents that prevents the growth and development of new business in the territory. The problem, Mr. Gittens said, was “largely the result of problematic management practices.”

At last week’s hearing, Public Service Commission (PSC) Executive Director Donald Cole stated, “It will be difficult to find the personnel with the requisite level of experience who are not past or present members of the [authority’s] management or board.”

According to primary co-sponsor Senator Alicia Barnes, speaking during Thursday’s hearing, appointed board members may now include residents of the territory, one per district, who reside outside of the USVI to capitalize on off-island expertise. Similar considerations and approvals were made at Thursday’s hearing by appointing Reginald Vigilant to the University of the Virgin Islands Board of Trustee and Ian Tomlinson to the university’s RT Park board.

Free Trade Zone

As it relates to economic development in the territory, Bill No. 33-0299 was also approved to designate the south shore of St. Croix as an enterprise or free trade zone. This bill was sponsored by Senators Novelle Francis and Janelle Sarauw.

Senator Javan James, a long-time supporter of the bill dating back to its origin during the 31st Legislature, said, “I want to see young Virgin Islanders being successful and wealthy.” He further encouraged young entrepreneurs to seek the advice of the Senate and legal counsel so they could fully take advantage of the free trade zone, if the bill becomes law.

Mr. James reminded residents that legislators pass these bills to bring money into the government and appropriate their use; the executive branch’s responsibility is spending of those funds; however, management of those funds, which he considered the “number 1 problem in the [territory],” is equally important.