

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Citing Mold At St. Croix Legislature, Senators Pass Bill Appropriating \$4 Million For Rent, New Building

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Ernice Gilbert **December 04, 2017**



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ST. THOMAS -- Senators who make up the 32nd Legislature on Friday approved a bill securing \$4 million to pay for rent for two facilities and to "hopefully" eventually purchase a building in Golden Rock, with proponents of the measure -- chief among them the bill's co-sponsors Senators Myron Jackson and Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly -- contending that the current facility in Frederiksted is infested with mold, a situation Mr. Jackson told The Consortium last week had existed prior to Hurricanes Irma and Maria, but has since worsened.

While the majority of lawmakers favored the bill, Senator Alicia Hansen dissented, and pointed to space in the facility that the Dept. of Human Services utilizes in Frederiksted as an alternative to the current complex. The Government of the Virgin Islands is already paying tens of thousands of dollars monthly in rent for the D.H.S. building.

The bill re-appropriates funds that were to be used to repair the Juan F. Luis Hospital's heating, ventilation and air conditioning system, called HVAC, and monies to repair the hospital's sewer issues. In total, \$4 million would be spent on the aforementioned work: \$1 million for the HVAC issues and \$3 million for the sewer problems. The funds were redirected from section 1 of Act No. 7972 and section 2 Act No. 7973.

Making their case for using the funds, the senators argued that since the hospital has been condemned, there was no longer use for the funds.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly, who has emerged as one of the strong proponents of the current measure, was on the other side of the spectrum in 2016, when senators attempted to purchase the former Innovative building, which has [since been acquired](#) by business man and gubernatorial candidate Warren Molser for about \$4.7 million.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly lashed out at Senate Democrats in August 2016, and said if the building were to be purchased, it should be used as a government-owned mental health facility; not the Legislature. And she condemned a move by Senate Democrats in 2016 to tour the facility, deeming it "a total disregard of the preemption rules of the legislation."

"The people of the territory expect us to create jobs and to pass legislation that will positively impact and cure our societal ills. To consider spending millions of dollars to relocate the St. Croix Legislature is simply appalling and a slap in the face to our constituents," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly [said in 2016](#).

On Friday, however, her stance was starkly different: "We know we need to find a new building," she said, "both temporarily and permanently."

The measure was supported by all but three senators: Mrs. Hansen, Tregenza Roach and Janette Millin Young. Sen. Marvin Blyden was absent.

Correction: Dec. 4, 2017

A previous version of this story stated that \$4 million would be used only to pay rent for facilities housing the Legislature. However, the funds will be used to pay rent at two facilities, and to "hopefully" later purchase a building in Golden Rock, St. Croix, according to Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly. The story has been updated to reflect the correct information.

Feature Image: Current St. Croix Legislature (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)