

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Nelson Wants Federal Oversight On Local Government Spending. He Is Also Still Bullish On Marijuana Legislation

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Ernice Gilbert **December 19, 2017**



Senator Positive Nelson [is running for governor](#). But his press conference held at Palms at the Pelican Cove on Monday morning, he insisted, had nothing to do with his gubernatorial run, but rather his concerns relative to the territory's recovery following Hurricanes Irma and Maria and developments that have followed. These concerns include the community disaster loan (CDL) and the federal government's stipulation that it be paid first over the government's current bondholders; the Mapp administration's \$7.5 billion request in disaster assistance from Congress and how the funds will be spent; perceived corruption in government and Mr. Nelson's current position on the benefits of

marijuana -- medicinal and recreational -- for the territory.

Relative to the CDL, Mr. Nelson said the federal government, since it's demanding priority debt service payments over the territory's bondholders, should buy the debt -- which stands at over \$2 billion -- from the bondholders. "If you're going to require lien you have to be willing to buyout our existing bonds so we could remain in the good with these individuals," Mr. Nelson said. "It would give more time down the road, more money going to the general fund, and it gives us time to rebuild infrastructure and rebuild our economy."

On the \$7.5 billion disaster aid request, Mr. Nelson applauded the effort, but said he needed more details as to how the funds would be spent. The senator also questioned the continued use of the V.I. government's current lobbyists in Washington, a firm he said has been paid tens of millions of dollars over the course of 40 years. He suggested that the government was not getting the best possible service for the money it continues to spend with the lobbying firm. "When you have new people, they are more hungry," he said.

The senator like many others appeared to be confident that the federal government would provide some, if not all, of the \$7.5 billion the local government has requested. In responding to a question from this reporter, Mr. Nelson said if Congress decided to not help the territory in its time of it, "it would really show who they are."

Congress is on the brink of signing a \$1.5 trillion tax cut bill into law, and is wary of piling additional debt to the already ballooning deficit, currently well over \$20 trillion. And the Trump administration has shown little appetite for spending big sums on the disasters, and was criticized by Republicans and Democrats alike for [introducing a disaster aid package](#) last month of \$44 billion that lawmakers saw as grossly inadequate.

Mr. Nelson said in light of the disasters and the opportunity to start anew, the territory should focus on renewable forms of energy. He also signaled his support for some level of burning of the territory's vegetative debris left behind by the storms. The senator said those who oppose burning were largely silent on emissions produced by the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority and the former HOVENSA refinery.

The senator also called for some federal oversight on government spending, even as he opposed an oversight board -- the latter of which would basically take control of the government's finances and how funds are expended, à la Puerto Rico. Mr. Nelson said he felt an atmosphere of distrust while in Washington, with Congresspeople alleging corruption in the local government, and the Senate's apparent ineffectiveness to reign in the governor.

The veteran lawmaker opposed the mass evacuation of patients, and said if the hospitals are to be rebuilt, they should not be small, but rather big enough to accommodate Caribbean nationals looking to travel for healthcare purposes.

He also assailed the governor for his recent interactions on social media, where Mr. Mapp told a constituent to "[go \\$&#k yourself](#)," and responded to another who asked the governor about his current residence, by stating, "[Wit ur mudda](#)," a known insult in the Caribbean.

"We are better than that. If you feel like being like Donald Trump move to the states. It's not about the person, it's the office of the governor," Mr. Nelson said. The senator also invoked spirituality, stating, "We need to have an anchor and rod in these times."

While Mr. Nelson did not mention his marijuana initiatives during the press conference, an agenda that has dominated his years in office, the senator told The Consortium that his stance in support of medicinal marijuana and even adult marijuana use for recreational purposes had not changed. But the bill to introduce medicinal marijuana as an industry in the USVI is currently languishing in the Senate Committee Health, Hospitals and Human Services, which is chaired by Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, an ardent foe of anything that concerns marijuana in the territory.

"The key opposition, unreasonably -- and I did send correspondence asking the president to let it be heard by the Committee of the Whole in fairness to the people who voted on it -- but Senator O'Reilly, one person... I don't believe that she's going to give it an ear with a hearing, and if so it won't be a fair hearing because she has demonstrated publicly over and over and over her bias against medicinal cannabis, no matter what medical journal or scientific research is in front of her," Mr. Nelson said.