

# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## At Press Conference, Majority Caucus Senators Refute Notion That They Were Inactive After Irma And Maria

Politics / **Published On January 18, 2018 09:06 PM /**

Ernice Gilbert **January 18, 2018**



ST. THOMAS -- Gathering at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall today, senators who make up the majority caucus, led by leader Neville James, forcefully refuted the notion that they were inactive after Hurricanes Irma and Maria, a belief held by many residents throughout the territory, who say the lawmakers weren't visible with their efforts after the storms, if they were active at all.

But the caucus -- among them Senators Kurt Vialet, Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, Myron Jackson, Jean Forde, Mr. James, Novelle Francis, Samuel Sanes, Brian Smith, Marvin Blyden and the newest majority member Janelle Sarauw -- at length defended its members' record relative to their response following the storms, a segment that took up

most of the press conference.

Mr. James said he was "rejecting the notion that the Legislature was not working on behalf of the people of the territory. For those who desire to continue to perpetuate that fraud, that's on you," he said. Mr. James was asked by a reporter about the origin of the alleged fraudulent claim, but he instead dodged the question, stating that he did not want to stir contention by pointing fingers.

Residents, throughout the weeks following the storms, were asking for senators to be more visible; it wasn't a claim made up by political opponents -- although it can be used to score points this election cycle. There were several major relief efforts immediately after Hurricane Irma as well as after Hurricane Maria -- including efforts by locals and the VI diaspora, but the more visible faces of those efforts were everyday residents.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly, vice president of the 32nd Legislature, spoke of majority caucus members from her district, giving some details of what she said was their work on behalf of residents following the storms. And she apologized on behalf of the senators for not getting back to official duty as quickly as their St. Thomas counterparts, noting the vast damage she said the St. Croix offices sustained following Maria.

Mr. Jackson, president of the 32nd Legislature, also highlighted what he said were the efforts of senators in the St. Thomas-St. John District. And spoke at length of the body's work to help the Mapp administration, even as he reminded that the function of responding to storms was that of the executive branch.

The lawmakers said they intend to start querying Mapp administration officials from various departments and agencies about the recovery timeline of their respective areas of function. Senators will also seek the latest recovery-related information from these department and agency heads. The meetings will start on Jan. 24 with the Committee on Government Affairs, Veterans, Energy, and Environmental, chaired by Mr. Sanes. Lawmakers said they weren't pleased with the length of time it took to restore power to the territory, and they intend to learn why the work was so protracted, as well as what could be done to streamline the process the next time a devastating storm strikes the territory.

The majority caucus members said they were eager to listen to what the governor has to say during his State of the Territory Address, set for Monday at 7:00 p.m. The lawmakers listed 6 areas that they expect to hear from the territory's leader on: Education, healthcare, energy, infrastructure, finance and tourism. "Tourism is the goose that lays the golden egg," Mr. James said, adding that the territory is heavily reliant on dollars deriving from the mainstay industry to keep operations afloat.

Mr. Blyden, who heads the Committee on Public Works, Waste Management and Planning, said he wasn't pleased with what he was hearing relative to housing for residents displaced by the storms. The senator spoke of a woman who visited his office today with her eight children. She was employed at a hotel and had received respite from the facility. But her time was up and had no place to live. "To have no emergency housing is a travesty," Mr. Blyden complained.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly and Mr. Violet spoke of the importance of restoring healthcare in the territory. Mr. Mapp had said that modular units, called the "Western Shelters", would be installed at both the Juan. F. Luis Hospital (J.F.L.) and the Schneider Regional Medical Center (S.R.M.C.) by mid-December, but that has yet to happen. Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said she was told that FEMA and government officials were moving away from the Western Shelters setup to a more permanent arrangement. According to Mr. Violet, J.F.L. and S.R.M.C. recently received separate drawdowns from the [community disaster loan](#), recently approved by FEMA, of \$6.8 million and \$3.8 million respectively.

As for their trip to Washington with Mr. Mapp [to lobby on behalf of the USVI](#), senators deemed their conversations with the congresspeople as successful. Mr. Blyden, for example, said because of the trip, businessmen were visiting the territory with the intention of investing in both districts. "

*Feature Image: St. Croix resident shakes Tim Duncan's hand during a relief effort put on by Mr. Duncan after Hurricane Irma. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)*