

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Editorial | 11 Senators Attending Seatrade Is A Blatant Waste Of Taxpayer Money

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This morning, Senate President Myron Jackson [revealed](#) to The Consortium that 11 senators were traveling to attend Seatrade Cruise Global in Florida, which begins on Monday and ends on Thursday.

Yes, taxpayers will be footing the bill for eleven lawmakers and their staff members to stay in hotels in Fort Lauderdale, Florida for four (maybe more) days, so these senators could attend the event to abreast themselves of the latest trends in the cruise line industry. Also attending will be Governor Kenneth Mapp and his team, team members and officials from the Department of Tourism, officials from the Virgin Islands Port Authority (VIPA) and Officials of the West Indian Company (WICO).

For the governor, the trip is understandable. As the territory's leader, Mr. Mapp carries considerable weight in the decision-making process for all the territory's ports of call, and his presence at Seatrade could only serve as a plus. For WICO, which governs its own affairs and makes its own money -- and whose stake in the cruise line business is the most important in the USVI, as WICO is the most popular port of call -- the trip is indelible. Even for VIPA, which governs Crown Bay and the Ann E. Ambramson ports, being at Seatrade is important. And no explanation is needed for Tourism's presence.

But having 11 senators heading to Florida, along with their staff, to attend an event that is already flooded with local officials whose jobs demand that they produce results at Seatrade Cruise Global, is a blatant waste of taxpayer dollars, coming at the worst time possible: When the territory's economy is struggling to recover from a protracted recession that was worsened by the 2017 storms, and a government that has been foreclosed out of the bond market because of its dire financial trajectory, and is currently getting by on low-interest loans provided by the U.S. Treasury.

Most of the lawmakers attending are Democrats or are part of the majority caucus -- Senators Kurt Violet, Samuel Sanes, Brian Smith, Mr. Jackson, Novelle Francis, Janelle Sarauw, Marvin Blyden, Neville James, and Jean Forde. Couldn't the majority caucus, in considering the territory's financial plight, have held a meeting and settle on sending one member to the event? This senator would be responsible for gathering information, attending the conferences and relaying what was learned and what should be implemented on a local level based on the details gathered. And the minority caucus, whose attending members include Alicia Hansen and Tregenza Roach, could have considered taxpayers and dispatched one member to the event as well.

Alas, couldn't the entire body, which should be keenly aware of the financial constraints that the USVI faces, come together and agree to send one senator to Florida?

And for all these years they've been spending taxpayer dollars on the costly trip, what have they produced? Year after year, they attend, where are the results? Before hurricanes Irma and Maria, the territory's cruise line industry was already in decline. Local leaders were told to [innovate or get left behind](#) -- so the decline in cruise lines cannot solely be blamed on Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Are these senators not aware of the struggles locals are facing? Government employees salaries -- already budgeted to the last dollar -- are being leached by an array of deductions, among them the [soon-to-fail](#) pension system called the Government Employees' Retirement System, which has an unfunded liability of over \$4 billion.

Many residents have been waiting on their tax refunds for years and have yet to collect what is due to them. Teachers and other government employees are being compensated at levels eight years behind. The structural deficit of the government, projected in the hundreds of millions, has not been resolved and lawmakers have yet to produce a complete solution to address these ailments.

The point here is, the territory is cash-strapped, and taxpayers -- and aid from the federal government -- are what's keeping it from sinking. These senators should be way more responsible with the people's money. Lawmakers often say that they come under fire for matters they cannot control. But there is really no good explanation for 11 senators

heading to Florida on the backs of mostly poor taxpayers, for an event that already includes three separate Virgin Islands delegations.

Last year, [only four senators attended](#), after being berated by residents the year before [when 9 of them made the trip](#). This year, the Senate is back to its same old habits of thoughtless spending -- even as the U.S. Virgin Islands is at its worst position financially and economically since formation.

Below, the 11 lawmakers who are attending Seatrade Global:

1. Kurt Vialet
2. Neville James
3. Sammuel Sanes
4. Alicia Hansen
5. Novelle Francis
6. Myron Jackson
7. Jean Forde
8. Tregenza Roach
9. Marvin Blyden
10. Brian Smith
11. Janelle Sarauw

Written by: The Virgin Islands Consortium Editorial Board.