

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Petition To Fundamentally Change Makeup Of VI Legislature Draws Closer To Becoming Reality (Update)

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Update: locations where the petition can be signed have been added to the third paragraph of this story.

When the Titling Board of the Virgin Islands [in April](#) voted to add a question to the 2018 General Election ballot that, if voted on favorably by a majority of voters, would transform the makeup of the Senate -- moving from the current system of island-wide and district-wide voting, to a system that proponents of the measure hope will see better representation for all Virgin Islanders -- a required step before being placed on the ballot

was the signature of at least 10 percent of the territory's voters on a petition that is currently being circulated.

On Thursday, Supervisor of Elections Caroline Fawkes made known that of the 2,298 signatures needed in the St. Croix district, 1,317 voters had already signed it. And of the 2,530 signatures needed in the St. Thomas-St. John district, 641 voting residents has signed as of June 14.

Locations where the petition can be signed on St. Croix are Armstrong's Ice Cream in Frederiksted, Vegetarian Creation in the Baron Spot Mall, Cast Iron Pot Restaurant in La Grande Princesse, and Zeny's Restaurant on King Street in Christiansted. In the St. Thomas-St. John District, locations with the petition are Natural Grocery in Mandela Circle, along with KLR Supplies. Absentee voters cannot sign a petition of the Election System.

Local law requires that the petition circulates for 180 days, which is the equivalent of six months. According to the Elections System of the Virgin Islands, circulation of the petition started on May 1, which means it should run through October, 2018. The general election takes place on November 6. If the current trend holds pace, the petition should reach its goal in both districts before the deadline.

The question that was approved to be asked on the ballot after hours of deliberation, starts by explaining the proposal: "Title 2, Chapter 6 of Virgin Islands Code entitled Apportionment of the Legislature is amended to read as follows: There are five Legislative Districts with 9 district senators and 6 at-large senators: District of St. Croix East shall have two senators, District of St. Croix West Shall have two senators, District of St. Thomas East shall have two senators, District of St. Thomas West Shall have two senators, District of St. John shall have one senator, voted on by the qualified electors of the respective districts. The proposal further states that there shall be six at-large senators, "three shall be residents of St. Croix and three shall be residents of St. Thomas, voted on by the qualified electors of the Virgin Islands Code."

The question then asks: "Shall this proposal become law?"

The Titling Board also approved the question's summary to be placed on the 2018 ballot, which reads: "This initiative seeks to amend Title 2, Chapter 6 of Virgin Islands Code entitled Apportionment of the Legislature to create the following districts: District of St. Croix St. East, District of St. Croix West, District of St. Thomas East, District of St. Thomas West, and District of St. John. The initiative also seeks to create the following at-large senators: Three shall be residents of St. Croix, and three shall be residents of St. Thomas."

The Titling Board voted unanimously for the ballot question and summary. Board members included Attorney General Claude Walker, who chaired the hourslong meeting in April, Mrs. Fawkes, and Attorney Yvonne Tharpes, legislative chief legal counsel, among others.

The proposal to place the question on the ballot was introduced by an organization named the St. Croix Retirees Group, Inc. The group's special project coordinator, Mary Moorhead, who was actively involved during the meeting, told The Consortium that while

St. Croix has seven senators, not one of them lives in Frederiksted, a reality she said has placed the town at a disadvantage. "You go to the Senate and you can't really have anybody to answer, specifically with the G.E.R.S. [Government Employees' Retirement System] situation," Ms. Moorhead said. She said the group has been attending Legislature hearings for years advocating on the behalf of retirees. "We have been testifying on just about every single legislation they brought to deal with G.E.R.S.," Ms. Moorhead said.

With two senators representing the east side and two senators representing west side of the St. Croix and St. Thomas districts, and one representing St. John, proponents of the measure believe Virgin Islanders will be better represented. And with six at-large senators vying for territory-wide votes, supporters see equal representation for the entire territory.

The ballot question's passage could usher in a new day in the U.S. Virgin Islands, pending the required number of signatures are collected and a majority of voters approve of the question on the general election ballot. It would mean senators would have to hone in their focus on the district of each island that they were elected to serve, and not the whole island. And the six at-large senators would be focused solely on the growth of the territory as a whole. There would also be added pressure on senators to perform, as the proposal would weaken the advantage of senators with island-wide strength, who are usually voted in based on name recognition and popularity.

Among advocates of the proposal at the April meeting was Mario Moorhead, brother of Ms. Moorhead and legendary radio personality and historian on St. Croix. Mr. Moorhead has been calling for such change to occur on his radio show, and has been sharing the benefits of apportionment with his listeners — most of whom have been receptive to the idea.

And Virgin Islanders in general have long called for change in the manner in which the territory elects its lawmakers, with a decrease in the number of senators and sub-districting being popular among many.

Interestingly, Ms. Fawkes said while the question will be placed on the ballot in November once all requirements are met, the proposal could actually become law before, but only if current lawmakers take up the proposal and approve it. (According to law, once the petition is approved, it is sent to the Senate, which could then decide to take action on it as is, amend or fail it. However, for the petition not to be placed on the ballot, senators must pass the measure as presented in the petition. If not, the petition is placed on the ballot where voters get to decide its fate.)

If a majority of voters approve, the proposal immediately becomes law, and would be immune from the governor's veto, according to Ms. Fawkes. The new law would also be immune from a repeal or amendment by the Legislature during a three-year period after it's approval, "unless the Legislature acts by a two-thirds majority," she said.