

The Virgin Islands Consortium

VI Carnival Committee's Financial Records Subpoenaed By Lawmakers After No-Show Of Key Committee Members

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ST. THOMAS -- The one member of the Virgin Islands Carnival Committee (V.I.C.C.) who attended a Wednesday hearing in the Committee on Workforce Development, Consumer Affairs and Culture, was grilled by senators -- more pointedly Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly -- for the no-show of the carnival committee's leadership, and the apparent discrepancies in the V.I.C.C.'s financial records, a pattern committee members said have existed for years.

The only member to attend the hearing was V.I.C.C. Executive Director Halvor Hart. Members who were supposed to be present but failed to attend -- even after the committee had rescheduled the meeting to accommodate them -- included the carnival committee's chairman, vice chairman, and treasurer -- three people with the committee's financial information that would have proved useful to the Wednesday Senate hearing.

The matter is important because for years the V.I. Carnival Committee has refused to fully open its books to the Senate, leaving many to question the motive. Taxpayers fund the carnival in large part, with other funds being provided through private sponsorships and the committee's own efforts. This year, the government provided \$545,000 of the V.I.C.C.'s \$898,000 budget.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly, a veteran lawmaker known for doing her research before hearings and asking pointed, sharp questions -- and who is serving her last few months in the Senate -- castigated the V.I.C.C. for the no-show and the dearth of information provided on Wednesday. And while much of the blows was intended for the V.I.C.C. members who did not attend, Mr. Hart fielded much of the roasting, prompting Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly, before motioning for the subpoena near the end of the hearing, to convey to Mr. Hart that her actions were not personal.

"When I express frustration, when I try to seek accountability, I do it because it's the right thing to do, it's my job to do it, and if you were not the executive director, you would want your elected officials to do the same," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly told Mr. Hart. "But it's not personal. I am not accusing you of any wrongdoing, and it is not intended to be offensive."

Watch: Kes Performs "Hello" at the VI Carnival Village in April

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Before the soft closing, however, Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly was relentless in her efforts to gather information from Mr. Hart. The executive director had brought along some financial information with him to the committee hearing, but lawmakers complained that the information provided was insufficient and used only broad categories and not itemized details as usually found in most reports. And the financial information provided was not organized using known software -- instead it appeared to be haphazardly thrown together. See below.

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Asked why the financial report was not meticulously prepared, Mr. Hart said a full report was being organized to be presented at the V.I.C.C.'s budget hearing set for August. But the senators' frustrations were not allayed by the response, and they reminded Mr. Hart that at past budget hearings, lawmakers have been iffy about the information provided, which always seem to be incomplete.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly asked Mr. Hart about the QuickBooks software and whether it was being utilized by the carnival committee. Mr. Hart said the software is used by the committee, but that he could not print a report until the end of the fiscal year, which is June 30. Mr. Hart was responding to a question posed by Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly that sought an answer on why the committee hadn't used a program in the software that

allowed for the quick generation of reports.

Mr. Hart's response caused the senator to pounce. She said QuickBooks is able to generate reports "in the middle of a month, in the middle of a week -- in the middle of the day."

Continuing her cutting questions, Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly pried out of Mr. Hart that some documents had been disposed of following the hurricanes, because they had apparently been "messed up" by the 2017 storms. This information was furnished by Mr. Hart after Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly asked about documents that were said to have been shredded by the committee.

When asked whether the "messed up" documents would help answer some of the important questions being asked at the hearing, Mr. Hart said he was not present when the disposal of the documents occurred, nor was he notified of the action beforehand.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly was incensed: "No one asked the executive director or confirmed with you whether documents should be shredded?" she asked. "No, senator," Mr. Hart said.

The subpoena, which was voted on by all senators present -- Myron Jackson, Janette Millin Young, Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly and Ms. Sarauw -- seeks a list of sponsors and the amounts they have donated, V.I.C.C.'s credit card and bank statements, along with all its contracts, for the years 2015 through 2018.

Feature Image: Halvor Hart under oath at a Senate hearing on Wednesday (Credit: VI Legislature)