

The Virgin Islands Consortium

In Open Letter To Senate, Democratic Party Assails Mapp, Demands Transparency During Oil Refining Agreement Hearings

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The Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands on Monday provided the media with an open letter that it wrote to senators of the 32nd Legislature -- most of whom are Democrats -- assailing Governor Kenneth Mapp on a number of issues and calling for transparency and for senators to do their due diligence when hearings for the landmark oil refining agreement between the Government of the Virgin Islands and Arc Light Partners, LLC, the owners of Limetree Bay Terminals, commence.

"It is no surprise as we approach the 2018 elections that "Santa" Kenneth Mapp is showing up with a bag of shiny new toys," the open letter begins, setting the tone for the rest of the missive. "True to form, we knew it would be coming, along with the gentler, kinder persona that has not been seen of Governor Mapp since the last campaign. What we also have not seen is the requisite preparation for the new undertaking recently announced by the governor to resume operations at St. Croix's refinery within two years. With the promise of many jobs and the money that comes with them, we want most, if not all of it, to circulate here and strengthen our Virgin Islands economy," said the party.

The party said it welcomed the possibility of new jobs to the territory, and hesitantly gave the governor partial credit for the agreement. "Appreciation is extended to those who negotiated the deal, but Virgin Islanders must also insist on full transparency about matters surrounding the new Arc Light, et. al agreement," reads the letter. "We need to know about anything and everything that will impact our ability to recover fully and permanently from our lingering economic and hurricane disasters."

To that end, the letter went on to cast the Democratic Party's gubernatorial teams vying for the nomination on August 4th as "three knowledgeable, experienced, innovative teams," who the party said "need our current senators - if the 32nd Legislature will be the decider - to ask the hard questions."

"The appearance of just rubber stamping what may look like "great news for the people of the Virgin Islands," as Mapp has proclaimed, will not be acceptable," the letter says. "Senators are implored to ask the probing questions, and to methodically undertake their own due diligence on the impact of the proposals and the governor's announced priorities for the \$36 million in spending."

With the subtitle "Preparation and Planning", the party said, "It was general knowledge that new refining was coming since at least January of this year, What, if any, job training, small business exploration and development were done in preparation? Already, we find ourselves having to import workers to fill the territory's recovery needs. Some are thinking about staying, some may even be registering to vote here, but it is likely that most are sending the money earned here back home. Do we know what our local pool of potential construction workers is? What plans are in place to reach out to Virgin Islanders who are now abroad to help fill the 700 skilled permanent jobs that will be coming? What kinds of management/career positions will be available for Virgin Islanders? Is there a mandate for a training component?

"What kinds of businesses will the coming of refining spawn or grow, and what is being done to stimulate this? Is our infrastructure ready, e.g. hospital, housing, schools, family focused activities? What is and where is the written comprehensive strategy for introducing this major project to St. Croix and when do the people get to read it in its entirety."

On environmental concerns, the party said, "When HOVENSA was operating and even when Diageo commenced operations, there were many environmental concerns raised by St. Croix residents. Have there been any discussions with surrounding communities about the restart of refining near their homes? And, if so, what concerns did they raise and have they been addressed? Is the government going to rely on self-reporting of operations and emissions at the new refinery or will the VI Department of Planning and

Natural Resources be vigilant and active in its oversight and its forthright reporting to the residents of St. Croix. It gives us no comfort that Trump's Environmental Protection Agency has granted permits, etc. They have demonstrated that they have no regard for ensuring clean air or water. What is being done to protect Virgin Islanders from the pollution of the air and water that we previously experienced?"

On the cost of energy, it said, "Mapp has announced several times this year about pending energy cost reductions as he must have known that WAPA was preparing to ask the Public Services Commission for an increase. Before HOVENSA closed there were early discussions about partnering with WAPA to bring in natural gas to fuel both. There was also some brief discussion on buying electricity from the refinery. Given our high utility costs and the impact on our families and overall economy, what is the plan to address this concern through this partnership?"

On priorities, the party said, "Thirty six million dollars will be spent on various projects. Taxpayers welcome their overdue refunds, but what of the remaining \$26 million. Have the most critical priorities for the territory today been selected and what is the rationale for the selections?"

On the development of hotels in the territory, the Democratic Party said, "The DPVI supports new hotel construction on St. Thomas as so many have been begging for a model branded hotel for many years, , but what about St. Croix? Until a question was asked of the Governor by the press, we heard of no such plans and all we still have are the frustratingly empty promises of the last three and one half years. But with all of the "better late than never" plans to finally do something about GERS, why not provide support to expand and enhance its Carambola property? St. Croix desperately needs hotel rooms."

And on G.E.R.S., it said, "Though merely a drop in the bucket of the almost two billion dollars owed to the government's pension system, we are hopeful that the GERS will really receive \$300 million over 10 years. However, we are more than skeptical about the purchase of Havensight by the Public Finance Authority- - a PFA headed by the governor (any governor)--with little accountability for its actions; and compounded by operations management by WICO, which is more of the same. The whole scheme sounds like a huge power grab by a governor who has constantly denigrated the leadership at GERS to the detriment of GERS members who have retired and been forced to live months, even years, without their hard earned pension benefits.

"The V.I. Democratic Party cautions all Virgin Islanders to look and listen objectively and closely to the present administration. Much to our dismay, Governor Kenneth Mapp has already demonstrated tendencies toward despotism and seems overly confident of his re-election. He has made the recent securing of federal disaster funds now, late in his administration as though it is a fulfillment of his campaign's promise, years ago, of "A Time to Build."

The Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands, therefore calls upon the Majority Caucus of the 32nd Legislature to allow full public participation and transparency when debating the Arc Light refinery proposal submitted by the Governor, and for this and the next Legislature to exercise strict oversight over the disaster recovery and other revenues of our government.

"The public has a right to participate in the democratic process through public hearings. Trust between the voters and their elected representatives can only be developed where there is full transparency. We insist that our senators should never operate under any political threat or forced deadline.

We, the leadership of the majority party, therefore, strongly recommend that the bills related to the refinery proposal be assigned to the committees of appropriate jurisdiction for public hearings during the special session on July 25th.

"In addition, we are calling upon the Legislature to seek its own independent expert review of the refinery proposal before voting on this important matter.

We believe that our leaders, while they need to take care of today, must look at the long term impacts of their decisions and be more concerned about the next generation, than the next election.

"We call on Democrats and all citizens of the Virgin Islands to stand united in our demand for full transparency and maximum public participation in the political process."

Feature Image: Governor Mapp signs GVI/Arc Light Partners, LLC refining agreement earlier this month at Government House on St. Croix (Credit: Government House)