

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Allison DeGaZon Shines During VIPC Interview; Novelle Francis Defends Record

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ST. CROIX -- Allison DeGaZon on Wednesday evening proved why she was the number 2 top vote getter in the Democratic Primary Election, and Senator Novelle Francis defended his record during Virgin Islands Political Consortium interviews held at VI Consortium's Five Corners broadcast studio.

The candidate and senator were the second set to be interviewed by Ernice Gilbert and Ashley Scotland, and they came prepared to answer the pertinent questions affecting the territory, while providing plans of their own to help move the islands forward.

Allison DeGazon

The candidate relayed her plans for G.E.R.S. with clarity and passion. She stressed the need to assure that funds allocated to the system are actually paid to it. "Who makes the decision to say we're not going to put that money in?" she asked rhetorically. "We take them to court, we do everything [but] nothing happens."

On legislation, Ms. DeGaZon said she would propose going into a 401k program. "I believe we need to give people back the power to account for their money and determine how much money they would like to retire with in the end," she said.

However, even with a 401k structure in place, the pension system still has to deal with a debt load that tops \$4 billion. To address this problem, Ms. DeGazon said she would support the idea of attracting new rum companies to the territory. "We are known for that. If we try to attract one or two and solely assign that money to G.E.R.S., that's a way to bring that liability down and make sure that we work closely with the executive branch to ensure that there is no more unfunded liabilities that take place," she said.

Attracting companies to the territory is usually an executive branch function. Governor Kenneth Mapp's current plan to stave off collapse includes half of all the funds the government receives from the Limetree Bay Terminals oil refining deal, estimated to be \$300 million over the course of ten years. And Democratic gubernatorial nominee Albert Bryan has spoken about attracting new rum companies to the territory to help fund the system.

Ms. DeGazon, a small business owner, said she would work to ease the tax burden on small businesses, as she believes that small businesses are the backbone of an economy and help maintain the middle class. Yet the central government is highly dependent on taxes it collects from businesses to function, so any halving of tax dollars would impact government operations. To make up for this, the candidate spoke of what she called cluster development, setups similar to Silicon Valley where there's a geographic concentration of businesses in the same and associated industries.

"If you do not have a strong middle class, which is by small businesses, we cannot survive. And I think that we have taken our eyes off of the middle class and we focused on a lot of other things. If the middle class is struggling, the entire economic atmosphere is weak. Wherever you have a middle class and small businesses that are being opened, that's when you have an economy that's driven and your unemployment rate is reduced and so forth."

On healthcare, Ms. DeGazon said she would stay in tune with hospital officials to be guided on legislation needed to enhance overall services and to create efficiency in operations. On legislation, she said she would push for telepharmacy operations in the territory. "There's so many things that we can do to create a more robust healthcare environment," Ms. DeGazon said.

































On addressing the structural deficit of \$200 million when there is no access to the bond market, combined with an economy that has yet to recover to a point where commerce is driving growth, Ms. DeGaZon, who worked at the Department of Labor as director of the Division of Unemployment Insurance, recalled her time at the department, and said millions of dollars owed had not been collected from small businesses by the government because of inadequate and outdated systems. The candidate said she was successful in securing a \$12 million grant from the federal government that allowed the division to create systems and bill small businesses accordingly.

Relative to legislation, Ms. DeGazon said she would bring forth a measure that would waive tax penalties for businesses that owe, as an incentive for these businesses to pay the principle amount due. "I kept saying to myself if we find a way to just waive some of the interest and penalties, they were willing to do that. And that translates into millions of dollars. And only by having the kind of experience that I have, and the insight I was able to get my hands on, am I able to specifically say there's money there," she said.

On the issue of residency and her arrest over 16 years ago, the candidate said she was not moved by the residency matter, as she knew [there was no merit to it](#). But she said the arrest issue being brought to the fore affected her because her children did not know about it, and suddenly -- aside from trying to grieve her mother's death -- Ms. DeGazon said she was contending with questions being thrown at her by her children relative to the arrest.

Ms. DeGazon and her ex-husband were in a domestic altercation 28 years ago in Georgia, where they were both arrested and immediately released. "In Georgia, once you fight or fight back, both parties are arrested while the incident is investigated. I will never allow anyone to put their hands on me and I protected my baby within me with my life. Counseling was sought and completed and we are now good friends and work well to raise our two children," Ms. DeGazon [wrote on her Facebook page](#).

Novelle Francis

Mr. Francis defended his record. On the notion that incumbents have not been productive enough, he said following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, the Senate's involvement played a critical role in moving the territory forward, and he listed a number actions taken during that time -- though many times not visible -- that were nonetheless crucial in the overall recovery effort. He said it was important that the legislative and executive branches of government displayed a united front when approaching FEMA and other federal agencies responsible for providing financial aid to the territory in wake of the storms.

"I think that a lot of times there's a perception that those individuals that make the most noise are the ones that's being productive," Mr. Francis said.

Asked whether he would take part of the responsibility for G.E.R.S.'s current state, the senator said he has been engaged in the process of actions taken to save the system, and that ideas to stave off collapse have kept him up at night.

On legislation, Mr. Francis said he's working on a measure currently in legal counsel that seeks to take 2.5 percent of gross receipt taxes to be collected on the \$7 billion of federal grants projected to come into the territory, and put that amount towards the system. If the

measure is approved and the estimated \$7 billion is indeed received, it would provide \$700 million to G.E.R.S., the senator said. And he said the 31st Legislature passed legislation that partly addressed G.E.R.S.'s insolvency issue, language of which include extending hazardous duty from 20 to 25 years and retirement age pushed from 40 to 50.

Mr. Francis also spoke of legislation that was sent to the Senate by Governor Kenneth Mapp that sees some \$300 million going towards the system during the course of 10 years. He hinted that some amendments were being made, and that an announcement was forthcoming.

Mr. Francis served at every capacity in law enforcement before becoming a senator -- from police officer, chief of police and police commissioner. At every level of Mr. Francis's tenure, however, the territory's crime rate remained about the same -- [one of the highest per capita anywhere](#). Asked whether he had failed to affect change in the area of crime, the lawmaker said, "I don't think so. Obviously we're working within the budget that we do have. There is a number of legislation that I've put in place to assist this. I believe that education is the key. I believe that a young man with a bright future will rarely take a dark path."

Mr. Francis said he has sponsored legislation to fund a Criminal Investigation Bureau, providing it with \$100,000 to assist with the timely submission of investigations. He also sponsored legislation for the [establishment of a crime lab](#).

"I have made sure that the police department receives the funding that's required, and even in instances where there were vacancies and other entities were cut, as a former law enforcement officer and understanding the importance of their budget, I made sure they remain with their budget," Mr. Francis said.

On the passage of Mr. Mapp's five-year economic recovery plan, which included the sin taxes, Mr. Francis said the alternatives -- shortened workweeks and furloughs -- were less attractive than taxing alcohol and tobacco products. And he said the Mapp administration recently reported that the government has collected about \$8 million since the measure [went into effect in March 2017](#).

As for his vote in favor of ratification of the Limetree Bay oil refining agreement, Mr. Francis said he had no regrets with the vote. "We see the mobilization, we see the increase in activities that's going on over at Limetree Bay, we see that our intersections in Sunny Isle are a lot more full that we have seen in many, many months, and I'm satisfied with the amount of activity we're seeing in that area," Mr. Francis said.

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