

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Petition To Fundamentally Change Senate Will Be On Nov. 6 Ballot After Gathering Required Signatures

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A petition that was approved to be circulated in the territory [in April by the Titling Board of the Virgin Islands](#), introduced by a group called St. Croix Retirees, Inc, headed by community activity Mary Moorhead, has finally collected the amount of signatures needed in the St. Croix and St. Thomas-St. John Districts to be placed on the November 6 general election ballot.

According to a release the Election System of the Virgin Islands issued Monday, the petition as of Monday had collected 2,343 signatures on St. Croix, which is above the required 2,298. Some 2,553 signatures in the St. Thomas-St. John District were collected, which is above the required 2,530. October was the deadline for the required

amount of signatures to be gathered.

A letter with the final numbers was forwarded to Senate President Myron Jackson by Supervisor of Elections Caroline Fawkes, as per the Revised Organic Act, Section 12.

The petition seeks to 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.

The question that was approved to be asked on the ballot 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, Supervisor of Elections Caroline Fawkes, and Attorney Yvonne Tharpes, legislative chief legal counsel, among others.

St. Croix Retirees Group, Inc. Special Project Coordinator, Ms. 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.," she 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.

With the critical hurdle of collecting the required number of signatures conquered, voters will now determine whether they want the new system in place of the current. The new proposal 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 oftentimes 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, Mrs. 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 to not 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 its approval, "unless the Legislature acts by a two-thirds majority," she said.