

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Refuse To Approve Reapportionment Measure. Instead, \$145,000 Will Be Spent On A Special Election.

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Ernice Gilbert **October 26, 2018**



ST. THOMAS -- Senators could have voted on Friday during a special session to approve the St. Croix Retirees Inc. reapportionment initiative that was signed by more than 8,000 Virgin Islands citizens, allowing the petition to become law, and thereafter take up the work of creating what the petition demands, and providing amendments to correct where it fails.

At least that was the suggestion of proponents of the initiative, among Attorney General Claude Walker. "Democracy is not perfect, and so the board was not trying to achieve

perfection," Mr. Walker [said recently](#), referring to the Titling Board's approval of the petition in April. "Rather, the board was seeking to take into account all of the concerns raised, and then ultimately allow this experiment in democracy to be presented to the Legislature for its decision as the Revised Organic Act requires."

Instead, lawmakers -- a majority of whom oppose the current petition -- introduced a bill to the floor that calls for a special election costing taxpayers \$145,000. The special election, according to Bill No. 32-0329, will take place on March 30, 2019. If it is approved by a majority of voters, the end result would be no different than if lawmakers had approved it today: the implementation of the initiative, subsequent changes and, inevitably, challenges.

The bill was sponsored by Senators Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, Myron Jackson, Novelle Francis, Neville James, Sammuell Sanes and Janelle Sarauw.

Mr. Roach, who supported the bill, said he believes that the decision to change the current makeup of the Legislature should be placed before voters. The senator, who is running as a lieutenant governor candidate in the general election with Albert Bryan, said additional education was needed on the potential changes.

Senator Alicia Hansen, who also supports the special election, said it was important to give all Virgin Islanders a chance to be part of the change, so that "no one can say that they didn't have the opportunity to participate in that decision," she said, echoing the sentiment of Mr. Roach and other lawmakers who supported the special election bill.

The bill "gives the power to the people to go to the polls and say, 'this is what I want the makeup of the Legislature to look like,'" Senator Janette Millin Young said.

Senator Dwayne DeGraff said it should be noted that both the majority and minority caucuses were in support of the special election measure.

Senator Positive Nelson said he was not supporting the initiative as written, instead he was merely giving voters a chance to decide on it themselves. He also took a swipe at Mario Moorhead, the legendary talk show host, historian and member of the St. Croix Retirees Inc. "I am very offended that Mr. Moorhead thinks that his way is the only way, and he has the only smart brain in the whole Virgin Islands. And that he's not willing to sit down and have discussions with other people."

Proponents of the petition see the new arrangement imitating the U.S. setup whereby at-large senators would operate like U.S. Congress senators representing the entire territory, and district senators operating more like those elected to the U.S. House of Representatives — through population and focusing on local issues.

The question that was approved to be asked in April by the Titling Board and placed 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 petition was supposed to be on the November 6 General Election ballot, but it failed to appear thereon because of time constraints. It was forwarded to the Legislature on October 1, fourteen days before early voting started. Yet the law requires that the Senate be given 30 days to deliberate the matter.

Early voting started and the Senate was still holding Committee of the Whole meetings discussing the petition. St. Croix Retirees Inc. sued the Supervisor of Elections in an attempt to halt the early voting process, as the ballot did not include the petition question. Soon after, however, the St. Croix Retirees Inc. and the Election System of the Virgin Islands came up with an agreement that called for a special election if senators failed to approve the petition.