The Virgin Islands Consortium

Finance Committee Plans Hearing With Bryan's Finance Team For Update On Territory's Financial Status

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The 33rd Legislature's Committee on Finance has planned a January 29 hearing -- the day after Governor Albert Bryan delivers his state of the territory address -- to get an update on the territory's financial status, Finance Committee Chair Donna Frett-Gregory has confirmed to The Consortium.

A release on the meeting was issued on Sunday, but it did not include a date, and it was unclear as to whether the meeting would be a private affair with Mr. Bryan's financial team, or a publicly held hearing in the Legislature. Mrs. Frett-Gregory clarified those issues Sunday evening, although she referred to the January 29 date as tentative.

In the press release, the committee chair mentioned issues the government has in paying its vendors, changes in the corporate tax structure as a result of President Donald Trump's tax law which affects how the local government collects taxes, and the District Court's ruling last year that barred the Government of the Virgin Islands from collecting excise taxes, among other concerns affecting the government's financial position.

“As the territory continues to be impacted by a myriad of the residual effects of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, inability to pay vendors, halt of excise tax collections, changes in the corporate tax requirements, to name a few, the members of the 33rd Legislature and Virgin Islands community require a clear picture of the territory’s financial position and we need to do so now," Mrs. Frett-Gregory said, according to the release.

"While we understand the governor is still working to finalize his cabinet, it is expected that the members of the governor’s financial team will be available to provide the required status update. It is mission critical that full, accurate financial information is provided as transparency and accountability will be the focus of the Finance Committee of the 33rd Legislature," the senator added. “We have much work to do. It is imperative that we hit the ground running to get early wins for our people."

While he was governor-elect, Mr. Bryan met with former Governor Kenneth Mapp's financial team, who gave him an update on the territory' financial position. Mr. Bryan defined the briefing to The Consortium during a Virgin Islands Political Consortium interview in December as stark, and indicated that the government would have a difficult time meeting its obligations come January, 2019.

“We’re bad,” Mr. Bryan said, referring to the government’s coffers. “We’re solid through December, but come January when all these raises kick in, we’re going to have to work hard to make sure that we’re balancing the funds.”

He said during the interview that the government’s precarious financial position was yet another reason for frugality. “That’s why [there will be] no wasteful spending,” he said. “I’m going to try to be as frugal as possible with the government’s money.”

Mr. Bryan said while government revenue was up, “it’s cash and timing that concerns me. So you’re going to get the money, but when?” he said.