

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Board Of Elections Action May Hinder Turnout Of Special Election On Reapportionment, St. Croix Retirees Inc. Says

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Action taken by the Board of Elections during a February 1 meeting stands to greatly affect the outcome of the March 30 Special Election on the Reapportionment Initiative.

That's according to St. Croix Government Retirees Inc. President Debra Christopher, who wrote to Board of Elections Chairman Raymond Williams on Monday to voice the organization's concerns. The Reapportionment Initiative, which aims to restructure the Legislature from two separate legislative districts into 5 separate legislative districts, initiated the petition, which managed to gather the requisite amount of signatures to be

placed on a ballot. The Legislature would continue to have 15 senators: 9 district senators and 6 at-large senators. The new system would imitate 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 Special Election of March 30, 2019 is the only election that requires 50 percent plus of participation by registered voters to be valid. On February 1, 2019, with no regard for the requirements of the Revised Organic Act, Section 12, the board voted to only open facilities used for primary elections. That means voters have to vote at facilities out of their neighborhoods, and they will require transportation to go vote. The government does not operate all the public transportation bus routes on Saturdays," reads the letter addressed to Mr. Williams.

The petition was originally supposed to be on the 2018 General Election ballot, but after collecting much more signatures than required by law, the petition [suddenly faced a new hurdle](#). Because of territory-wide hearings organized by then-Senate President Myron Jackson following the initiative's successful collection of signatures, the petition, which was already short on time to be on the ballot, missed the deadline. According to VI law, after collecting the requisite amount of signatures, the petition must be voted on by the Senate, which could then decide to approve, amend or fail it. However, for the petition not to be placed on the ballot, senators must act on it as presented in the petition.

[In October of last year](#), senators introduced and voted in favor of a bill that called for a special election set for March 30, costing taxpayers \$145,000.

"Because the Primary elections in the V.I. is usually for one political party only, it has the lowest participation of registered voters. Similarly, for 2018 Run-off election, only facilities of the primary elections were used. The run-off election had less than 50 percent participation, and there were long lines reported at precincts throughout the territory," Ms. Christopher wrote in her letter to Mr. Williams. "The board approved only one week for Early voting. Early Voting should begin Monday, March 11, 2019. The combination of fewer days for Early voting and less precinct locations for the Special Election Day are definite deterrents and challenges for a Special election mandated to have participation of the majority of registered voters in the territory."

The letter concluded by stating that, "Given the before-mentioned items, St. Croix Government Retirees request the Election System reconsider its plan of operation for March 30th Special Election to better accommodate the voters of the Virgin Islands of the United States. More days are needed for Early voting and more facilities are needed as precincts for the Special election to guarantee an efficient and effective process on Special Election Day. It is the duty and responsibility of the Election System to encourage and accommodate the voting populace in the exercise of their constitutional right with the least aggravation as possible."

Proponents of the bill calling for the special election explained their support of that measure. Then-Senator Tregenza Roach, now the territory's lieutenant governor, said the decision to change the current makeup of the Legislature should be placed before voters. He said additional education was needed on the potential changes.

Then-Senator Alicia Hansen, who also supported 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,’” then-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.

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.