The Virgin Islands Consortium

Boschulte, Callwood And Molloy Forwarded Favorably To Full Senate

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Governor Albert Bryan's picks for the Departments of Tourism, Finance and Labor were favorably forwarded to the full Senate by the Committee on Rules and Judiciary on Thursday.

Joseph Boschulte, the Department of Tourism commissioner-nominee, Kirk Callwood, chosen by Mr. Bryan to lead the Department of Finance, and Gary Molloy, who was tapped to head the Department of Labor, were solid enough to convince lawmakers of their worthiness to lead the aforementioned government arms.

Dept. of Tourism Commissioner Nominee Joseph Boschulte (Credit: VI Legislature)

The men spoke of their backgrounds as preparing them for the important roles, and vowed to enhance the offices they represent with new ideas and initiatives.

For Tourism, Mr. Boschulte spoke of putting to the forefront the advantages of the territory that sets it apart from other Caribbean destinations. Two of the most glaring differences is that the USVI, a US territory, does not require passport for Americans to visit. He also noted that the territory does not have a sales tax, and boasts duty-free shopping. Mr. Boschulte said while these advantages were always part of tourism's marketing strategy, they needed to be prominent fixtures, as they are distinguishing assets.

Mr. Callwood spoke of short-term goals if he were to be approved by the Senate. He said the department would continue its efforts of expediting assistance and funding under the Public Assistance program. "We have embarked on a plan with many applicants to provide training and technical assistance to avoid common mistakes that delay reimbursement or potentially result in audit findings and potential de-obligation of funds," Mr. Callwood said.

Kirk Callwood, Dept. of Finance commissioner nominee (Credit: VI Legislature)

The nominee spoke of nurturing a culture of fiscal responsibility, a goal he would accomplish "by collaborating with agencies to conduct quarterly training with fiscal officers to help reinforce GVI’s policies and procedures."

And Mr. Callwood said he would work to ensure that government insurance premiums are adjusted, as the current agreement includes rates that are 20 years old. "We are reviewing the actuarial reports to develop a plan that will amend the premiums collected in an effort to address reducing the unfunded liability," he said.

Mr. Molloy impressed the lawmakers on Thursday, as he gave satisfactory responses on a number of occasions, and was upfront in his testimony about the challenges facing the Department of Labor. Among them was D.O.L.'s Workmen Compensation program. Mr. Molloy said the program was on life support after it had for years grapple with challenges to meet costs for medical services, travel, equipment, lifetime payouts and biweekly payroll for injured workers.

"This is in addition to the extremely long wait times for the approval or processing due to lack of staff as well as very slow payments to providers," Mr. Molloy said. "My office has been inundated with calls and inquiries from claimants, employers, attorneys and providers regarding the status or follow up on cases and payments. As medical costs continue to escalate, the Workers’ Compensation program and funding to implement the program has been stretched far beyond its capacity."

Gary Molloy, Dept. of Labor commissioner nominee (Credit: VI Legislature)

He said the program owed $15 million dollars in payments to providers, "and that figure continues to grow daily as our clients seek medical care."

"We are at the point where we have had to make difficult decisions affecting the injured workers and the service providers. So, while the benefits are always provided to the claimants, we have had to put our service providers on a schedule to receive payments," Mr. Molloy said.

To start the process of addressing the problem, Mr. Molloy said the Division of Workers' Compensation Administration (WCA) should be the fully funded Government of the Virgin Islands no-fault insurance company.

"This company should be a part of the safety net that minimizes the adverse impacts of work-related injuries on the employees and employers of the territory by providing temporary medical and disability benefits for work-related injuries and diseases," he said. "The Workers' Compensation program employees should provide prompt service to injured workers' and providers and respond quickly to inquiries from attorneys, the Social Security Administration, Government Employees Retirement System, Legal Services, and insurance companies."