

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bryan's VITEMA Nominee Held In Committee; Sarauw Calls Out Administration For Late Appointment

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Governor Albert Bryan's nominee to serve as the director of the territory's most critical disaster emergency arm, the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA), was held in committee during a Committee on Rules and Judiciary hearing Thursday, with senators being doubtful that the nominee, Daryl DeFrance Jaschen, could effectively lead the sprawling agency after he was questioned on a myriad of VITEMA and disaster-related topics.

The candidate comes with an extensive résumé, but his performance Thursday left lawmakers unimpressed. Some of the items he mentioned as accomplishments were day-to-day tasks of the job, Committee Chair Alicia Barnes said. "You begin a paragraph

[that says] 'in support of VITEMA mission and mandates, I would like to share my accomplishments as director nominee to date', but these aren't accomplishments, these are just your day-to-day tasks and activities," Sen. Barnes charged. Some of the items listed, Mr. Jaschen's testimony noted, were part of what VI Code required. The items include a management council meeting, budget adjustments for FY 2019 and 2020 in accordance with mandates from the Office of Management and Budget, and attending weekly FEMA recovery meetings. "Those are day-to-day activities; you consider those accomplishments for purposes of a presentation before this committee for confirmation?" Ms. Barnes asked. Pressed further to give a straight answer, Mr. Jaschen said yes.

There were a number of instances where the nominee struggled to respond. He also admitted that a plan was not in place for St. John were a storm to hit.

With Mr. Jaschen's nomination in trouble, Senator Janelle Sarauw used the opportunity to criticize the Bryan administration for the length of time it took to nominate a director for VITEMA -- an agency, she said, that should have been among the first to receive leadership knowing the territory's yearly vulnerability to devastating hurricanes.



Daryl DeFrance Jaschen

"I want to put on the record that the executive branch is at fault here today. One of the first agencies [for which] a nominee should have been named should have been D.H.S. [the Department of Human Services], D.O.H. [the Department of Heath], VITEMA, and V.I.P.D. [the Virgin Islands Police Department]," Ms. Sarauw said. "Given our geographic location, a VITEMA nominee should not be before us today for hurricane season next month. Your late appointment is unacceptable."

Distribution centers were included for St. Thomas and St. Croix in Mr. Jaschen's presentation, but not St. John. The nominee said VITEMA has worked with the National Guard to identify two locations: Coral Bay and Cruise Bay. Ms. Sarauw reminded the nominee of the transportation problems St. John faced following the storms, and asked whether a plan was in place in case of a disaster. "At this point the answer is no," he

said.

Ms. Sarauw, echoing Ms. Barnes, said what Mr. Jaschen listed in his testimony document as accomplishments could best be described as day-to-day operations. "It is your duty to do such. I have listed in your testimony all of the plans to, what must be done, but has not been done. How prepared, to be honest, is VITEMA for June 1?"

Mr. Jaschen's response drew the angst of Ms. Barnes. He said, "We will never be fully prepared for a hurricane. We will never be fully prepared. We have to look at the risks and mitigate those risks based upon the people and time and resources we have. We are moving in the right direction, and a good question is what is the standard to be considered ready. I mean, I like the discussions we're having and I love the input we have from the organization here, and it serves us to relook at that and to emphasize our prioritization."

Ms. Barnes described Mr. Jaschen's statement as very concerning, though she appeared to interpret it incorrectly, believing that he said the territory would never be prepared, as compared to never being fully prepared. Senator Novelle Francis sought clarification from Mr. Jaschen. "We are working towards a solution to be prepared. We're not there yet, but I'm not saying we will never be prepared," Mr. Jaschen responded.

Hurricane season starts in less than a month.

Mr. Jaschen's nomination was held in committee, with five senators voting in favor of a motion by Senator Myron Jackson to do so -- Mr. Jackson, Kenneth Gittens, Stedman Hodge, Jr., Dwayne DeGraff and Ms. Barnes -- while Mr. Francis voted against the motion, and Senator Steven Payne was absent.