

The Virgin Islands Consortium

JFL Employees To Senators: 'We Put You In And We'll Put You Out'

VIC News / **Published On May 15, 2019 09:51 AM /**

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ST. CROIX -- Juan F. Luis Hospital employees gathered in the hospital's cafeteria, which isn't in operation, on Tuesday, angry and concerned. They had heard that a bill seeking to use \$39.5 million awarded to local medical facilities -- including JFL -- through medicaid, for a myriad of other purposes unrelated to the hospital was afoot and could soon become law.

Easily 30-40 employees came to either speak or show support. They said the local government and senators were allowing the hospital to go downhill. "In the next few months, if we don't do this now, senators, we put you in and we'll put you out," said one employee, with the others in the cafeteria cheering on.

The employees want the bulk of the funds to be used to shore up the hospital -- fix the dilapidated building, restrooms (the operating room has only one restroom in use), help with step increases -- employees say they haven't seen raises in years -- AC units in some areas are not working, along with a surfeit of other problems.

But not for use outside of healthcare, as the bill seeks to do.

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[Bill No. 33-0072](#) was sponsored by Senators Donna Frett-Gregory, Marvin Blyden and Kenneth Gittens. It was co-sponsored by Stedman Hodge, Jr., and Athneil Thomas -- all Democrats.

An attempt to special-order the bill to the Senate floor during a Tuesday session -- which would see it skipping vetting in the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for a final vote in the full body -- failed. If it had passed, the measure would only need Governor Albert Bryan's signature to become law. The bill was created by the senators who sponsored it and the Bryan administration.

Two St. Croix senators voted to have the bill special-ordered to the floor during Tuesday's session: Senators Allison DeGazon and Mr. Gittens, the co-sponsor. Ms. DeGazon told The Consortium Wednesday morning that she supported the bill after it was promised by the sponsor, Mrs. Frett-Gregory, that amendments were made. After the vote, however, it was realized that the amendments were not added, Ms. DeGazon said.

"I voted in favor because in [Frett-Gregory's] summary she voted as amended, and we made amendments giving the healthcare centers their money," Ms. DeGazon said. "While the voting was going on it was observed that no amendments were on the floor, so it failed. I was frustrated because I was never a part of the initial conversation." Ms. DeGazon said the amendments sought to use the bulk of the funds to pay for the hospitals' utility bills, while allocating \$1.5 million to each medical facility included in the \$39.5 million windfall. She said a second batch of medicaid reimbursement funds would soon be released, all of which would go to the health facilities. Ms. DeGazon did not say when the monies would be released, or how much.

Ms. DeGazon throughout the interview this morning expressed frustration with Finance Committee Chair, Mrs. Frett-Gregory, for the seemingly clandestine manner in which the measure was crafted and brought to the Senate floor. And she said the Bryan administration, which was involved in creating the measure, should also have caucused with his Democratic Majority in the Senate.

"The Majority Caucus was supposed to be brought in to discuss the money, then you bring it to committee. The committee was never included in the process," Ms. DeGazon said. "It appears as though a meeting was held unbeknownst to the Majority and members of the Finance Committee. I called [Frett-Gregory] out on that personally."

Strengthening Ms. DeGazon's comments, Ms. Barnes also had some concerns with the manner in which the measure progressed, concerns that were shared with Mrs. Frett-Gregory.

Dept. of Finance Commissioner Designee Kirk Callwood and Office of Management and Budget Director Designee Jenifer O'Neal both expressed their support on behalf of the Bryan administration for the bill [during a Committee on Finance hearing last week](#).

Below, the breakdown of how the government intends to use the funds:

- \$8.7 million to Department of Labor for the payment of outstanding workman's compensation insurance as set forth below;
 - a) \$6.4 million to Schneider Regional Medical Center
 - b) \$2.2 million to Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital & Medical Center
- \$9.9 million to the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital & Medical Center to be paid directly to the VI Water and Power Authority for outstanding bills;
- \$4.3 million to Schneider Regional Medical Center to be paid directly to the VI Water and Power Authority for outstanding bills;
- \$2 million to Department of Health for behavioral programs to be divided equally between the two (2) districts;
- \$3 million to the Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority for outstanding vendor payments;
- \$5 million to Juan F Luis Hospital for the payment of outstanding taxes owed to the Virgin Islands Bureau of Internal Revenue;
- \$4,541,060 to the general fund to assist in the cost of the government's negotiated salary increases.
- \$2 million for other purposes as follows:
- \$1 million for the St. Croix district:
 - \$200,00 for mental health services for the Department of Education's students and staff;
 - \$125,000 to the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation for garbage trucks;
 - \$105,000 to the Department of Human Services for the purchase of vehicles for the Meals on Wheels program;
 - \$150,000 to the Legislature for the youth summer employment programs;
 - \$420,000 to Bethlehem House for retrofitting;
- \$1 million for the St. Thomas/St. John district:
 - \$200,000 for mental health services for the Department of Education's students and staff;
 - \$150,000 for the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation for playground equipment for Alvin McBean Ballpark;
 - \$125,000 for the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation for garbage truck and other equipment;
 - \$150,000 for Tax Study Commission;
 - \$120,000 to Eldra Schulerbrandt Facility for two (2) passenger vans
 - \$105,000 to the Department of Human Services to purchase two (2) vehicles for the Meals on Wheels program;
 - \$150,000 to the VI Legislature for the youth summer employment programs;

Here's the breakdown of yesterday's special-order vote:

- Alicia Barnes: No
- Oakland Benta: No
- Marvin Blyden: Not voting

- Allison DeGazon: Yes
- Dwayne DeGraff: No
- Novelle Francis Jr.: No
- Kenneth Gittens: Yes
- Donna Frett Gregory: Yes
- Stedman Hodge: Yes
- Myron Jackson: No
- Javan James: No
- Steven Payne, Sr.: Yes
- Janelle Sarauw: No
- Athneil Thomas: Yes
- Kurt Violet: Absent

Along with the \$9.9 million going to WAPA for Juan F. Luis Hospital power usage payments, another \$8.7 million would also go to the struggling utility from an \$8.7 million payment to the Dept. of Labor, which would be for utility usage by both of the territory's hospitals, Ms. O'Neal said. In total, WAPA would receive roughly \$22 million.

Another \$5 million received by the Bureau of Internal Revenue from outstanding Juan F. Luis Hospital tax payments, would go towards paying 2016 tax refunds, Ms. O'Neal made known.

While the measure did not muster enough support to be special-ordered to the Senate floor, its fate has yet to be settled. JFL employees vowed to keep the pressure on, and vote out any senator in the St. Croix District who supports the bill's passage.