

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Gittens, Frett-Gregory Overthrown In Senate Reorganization

Government / **Published On May 15, 2019 08:01 PM /**

Ernice Gilbert **May 15, 2019**



Senator Kenneth Gittens, who served only four months as president of the 33rd Legislature, and Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, who was the Committee on Finance chair, were both overthrown this afternoon in a reorganization of the Senate Majority, The Consortium can confirm.

The deposition of Mr. Gittens and Mrs. Frett-Gregory occurred during a tumultuous Senate session on Wednesday, which saw Mr. Gittens -- after a motion was made for reorganization of the Majority -- calling a recess, reconvening 45 minutes later, and abruptly adjourning the session. Mr. Gittens also dismissed all central staff of the Legislature for the remainder of the day, including transportation and media, leaving

lawmakers stranded at the Earl B. Ottley Legislature in St. Thomas.

That's according to the senator voted as the new Senate President, Novelle Francis, who told The Consortium that after Mr. Gittens adjourned the session, which started on Tuesday and went into Wednesday, the Senate reconvened with a majority of nine senators this afternoon, all of whom participated in the reorganization of the Senate.

These senators are: Javan James, Alicia Barnes, Mr. Francis, Marvin Blyden, Allison DeGazon, Dwayne DeGraff, Myron Jackson, Steven Payne and Janelle Sarauw.

The senators who did not participate in the reorganization are Mrs. Frett-Gregory, Oakland Benta, Mr. Gittens, Stedmann Hodge and Athneil Thomas.

All but one senator who participated in the reconvening after the session was adjourned by Mr. Gittens, voted in favor of the reorganization, Mr. Francis said. Mr. DeGraff abstained. Kurt Violet, who was given the chairmanship of the Committee on Finance, was absent.

Mr. Jackson, Senate president during the 32nd Legislature, is now vice president of the 33rd body, replacing Mrs. Frett-Gregory.

Mr. Francis said the reorganization has left many individuals with hurt feelings, and he hesitated to participate in a live interview on The Consortium this evening, stating that emotions were still raw. Nonetheless, Mr. Francis, a third-term Democrat, said the work of the people must continue. "The institution is bigger than all of us. I've been asked to lead and I stepped up to the plate," Mr. Francis said.

A document with full details of the reorganization is forthcoming.

Mrs. DeGazon told The Consortium Wednesday afternoon that she was honored to be part of the new majority, and said the reorganized team would work together as opposed to operating in silo, hinting at part of what ruined the former majority.

"Purposeful governing is about making tough, gut wrenching decisions and it's also about figuring out a better way to do things," she said. "It is obvious that this move is about erecting a new leadership that is productive, considers all sides of a matter and does not work in a silo. I am honored to be asked to be a part of the majority and I will remain focused on my platform and a strong agenda for St. Croix as elected."

Gittens issues statement

Mr. Gittens issued a statement late Wednesday accusing 33rd Legislature lawmakers of attempting to cover up the impending results of an Office of the Inspector General audit report on the 31st and 32nd Legislatures' finances.

The senator was also not ready to cede his position, questioning whether the actions taken today by a majority of 9 lawmakers were legal.

Mr. Gittens said that shortly after assuming the office of Senate president, he discovered serious irregularities. Realizing the problems were much bigger than could be addressed internally, Mr. Gittens said he wrote to the Inspector General on February 6, 2019

requesting a full-scale audit.

“The 31st and 32nd Legislature operated beyond the bounds of both ethics and the law and every effort is being made to orchestrate a cover up,” Mr. Gittens said (in his statement, the senator still considered himself the president of the 33rd Legislature).

Mr. Gittens said he was elected by the people of St. Croix and, whatever the outcome, would continue to do his best on their behalf. He said his primary concern was any disruption in conducting the people’s business.

“At the end of the day any such disorganized and abrupt actions only serve in delaying action on the many important matters before us,” he said. “But we also must consider that the last time the body was abruptly reorganized the end result was chaos and, eventually, led to jail terms when the misdeeds caught up with them.”

He added, “This is not a drama session,” he said. “Our deliberations will never be without politics, but we must put the people’s business first. Some have forgotten that it is not about serving ourselves, we must remain ever mindful that it is about serving our people. May God continue to bless the U.S. Virgin Islands.”

Correction: May 15, 2019

A previous version of this story, because of a text error, stated that Senator Novelle Francis was voted Majority leader. That's incorrect. Senator Marvin Blyden retains his Majority leader position, while Mr. Francis was voted to serve as the Senate president in the reorganization. The story has been updated to reflect the correct information.