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Bryan Slams St. Croix Senators For Planning To Raise Salaries Of JFL Employees With Funds From $39.5 Million Medicaid Reimbursement

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Governor Albert Bryan in a statement issued Wednesday night slammed St. Croix senators who participated in a meeting at the Juan F. Luis Hospital on Tuesday for planning to raise the salaries of JFL employees with funds from a $39.5 million reimbursement received from Medicaid.

The Bryan administration's planned use of the funds -- a reimbursement to five of the territory's medical facilities -- angered employees of the Juan F. Luis Hospital, many of whom envisioned what they said were more important uses, including critical fixes to the hospital, and employee raises. Some hospital employees said they have not seen a salary increase in 15 years.

A Consortium video of the employees expressing their frustration has been viewed more than 44,000 times, and it captured the attention of St. Croix lawmakers, including those who maintain that they were not involved in the process of determining how the monies should be spent.

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The bill for the planned use of the monies, sponsored by Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, was sent back to the Committee on Finance after a special-order attempt by Mrs. Frett-Gregory during last week's Senate session failed. On Tuesday, the St. Croix lawmakers -- among them Kurt Vialet, Alicia Barnes, Novelle Francis, Javan James and Allison DeGazon -- agreed to make changes to the bill, including salary increases for employees of JFL.

Mr. Bryan assailed the lawmakers for making such a promise, and categorized their planned action as pandering. The statement was Mr. Bryan's harshest tone to the lawmakers since taking office.

“The recent moves of the new majority in promising raises to employers by directing a one-time cash infusion to a recurring annual expenditure is a flashback to exactly the kind of political pandering that has created our abysmal financial situation," Mr. Bryan chided. "Raises must be sustained every two weeks; they are a recurring cost. A one-time infusion of Medicaid reimbursement funds will not address this problem. As stated in my State of the Territory Address months ago, JFL Hospital alone has outstanding debts of $54 million to vendors, $13 million of which is payable to WAPA."

Yet even as Mr. Bryan says a one-time infusion of cash should not be used for reoccurring employee raises, Mr. Vialet, during the meeting on Tuesday, revealed that the $1.1 million that the lawmakers intend to use for raises of JFL employees, would come from $4.5 million that the Bryan administration had set aside for central government employee raises. In essence, Mr. Bryan intended to use $4.5 million from the one-time $39.5 million reimbursement for central government employees raises -- not JFL or other semiautonomous entities -- even though in his statement on Wednesday he said such funds should not be utilized for salary increases, according to Mr. Vialet. Those raises Mr. Vialet speak of, however, were codified into law under the Mapp administration, and not implemented by the Bryan administration.

During the Tuesday meeting, Mr. Vialet and other lawmakers acknowledged WAPA's woes, and indicated that funds from the $39.5 million would go toward the flailing utility. How much will eventually be paid to WAPA has yet to be determined, however. The failed measure had set aside roughly $22 million for the authority.

Mr. Bryan continued to assail the St. Croix lawmakers in his statement, again mentioning pandering as part of his description of their actions at the Tuesday meeting. He said while the JFL employees needed their raises, the territory needed to "change course" and take care of its debts first.

“We clearly understand that employees want their raises and they deserve them, but we must change course and unlike the past take care of our existing debts before we start creating new ones. The public voted for new, innovative and transparent leadership and a new approach in the legislature. This is exhibited in the voting numbers, where the newer senators eclipsed the incumbents. Voters have proclaimed that business, as usual, is not acceptable," Mr. Bryan said.

He added, “It is unfortunate but true--the public is seeing more of the same pandering for votes instead of a legislature that is dedicated to solving the tough issues. We must work together as there is much to do. I urge the legislature to move on with the bright ideas that they put forth in the election and work with our administration, on behalf of the people of the Virgin Islands to address the GERS, WAPA, and other problems that are crippling our greater progress. Work harder on your stated commitments to Virgin Islanders to identify new revenue generating streams and appropriate those funds toward our many outstanding obligations.”