

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Blyden Is Being Disingenuous By Claiming No Involvement In \$39.5 Million Medicaid Reimbursement Bill, Frett-Gregory Says

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Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, who had remained mostly silent during the unfolding of a matter that rocked the 33rd Legislature, in part leading to the ouster of Mrs. Frett-Gregory from the vice president and Finance Committee chair positions, as well as Senator Kenneth Gittens from the Senate president seat, broke her silence on Thursday. She said Senate Majority Leader Marvin Blyden, who spoke during a press conference the caucus held on Thursday [announcing another reshuffle](#), was being disingenuous by claiming no involvement in Bill No. 33-0072.

Bill No. 33-0072 appropriates specific sums of money to various government agencies from a \$39,467,909 retroactive Medicaid fund paid to the Virgin Islands Medical Assistance Program (V.I.M.A.P.) for the territory's medical facilities.

During the press event, Mr. Blyden said one of the reasons for the reorganization of the body on May 15 was the leadership style of those who held the top positions before. And he specifically pointed to what happened with Bill No. 33-0072 as an example, his narrative being Mrs. Frett-Gregory, then-Finance chair, worked with the Bryan administration and left out senators, including those of the Finance Committee.

There's one problem with this narrative, Mrs. Frett-Gregory told The Consortium during an interview Thursday following the airing of the press conference: Mr. Blyden is a sponsor of the bill and was indeed involved in crafting it. But listening to the press conference yesterday, you would not know it. (The Legislature has since removed the video from its Facebook platform.)



Senator Donna Frett-Gregory

"I think it is important as elected leaders to tell the truth," Mrs. Frett-Gregory said. "I respect the Democratic process and in any organization and entity of this nature, the majority rules. If the majority chooses to move in a different direction, I don't see nothing wrong with that. I will continue to focus on why the people of the Virgin Islands overwhelmingly voted for me last November." Mrs. Frett-Gregory said her foremost role was to fulfill the job that she was elected to do, and she pointed to a number of legislation she has sponsored that are now law. But yesterday's press conference where Mr. Blyden completely absolved himself from any involvement in Bill No. 33-0072 was striking, she said.

"Misinformation was shared with reporters. The Majority leader misrepresented the truth," she said.

Mrs. Frett-Gregory went on to explain what she said happened: "On April 15 I met with Blyden and his chief of staff to discuss the \$39.5 million bill. We discussed the bill and on April 16 he sent me an email documenting what he wanted to see. He mentioned he was looking forward to continued collaboration. I told him I think we needed to meet with the caucus to discuss this further." Mrs. Frett-Gregory said she specifically asked to meet with the Majority because under Mr. Blyden's tenure before the reorganization on May 15, "we were never able to meet in ways we wanted to meet, and we were having these "when are we going to meet" conversations.

There was a conference call held before the May 7 meeting to discuss the bill, she said. On the call were representatives of all 33rd Legislature senators except for Senators Oakland Benta and Kurt Vialet, according to Mrs. Frett-Gregory. She said some of the representatives were disengaged during the call.



Senator Marvin Blyden

Her point in explaining the process relative to Bill No. 33-0072, was to call out Mr. Blyden. "To say that you were not involved is very disingenuous. I understand that there were overarching concerns with the way the bill was laid out, but we can come together to address it." Mrs. Frett-Gregory said she appreciated the Wednesday session that allowed stakeholders to testify.

"Senator Blyden clearly has forgotten that he is not a co-sponsor of this bill, he is a sponsor. He is a sponsor of the measure. In addition, on May 7 when we had the hearing, he was the one that brought the measure to the floor and moved it to the full body. Again, I don't know what's happening here with his memory," Mrs. Frett-Gregory said.

She said Senator Violet was consistent from the outset that stakeholders should be allowed to testify, and he promised then to amend the bill to include funding for the East End Health Center in St. Thomas and Frederiksted Healthcare. Mr. Violet reiterated his intention with The Consortium Thursday morning.

"On May 7 I got emails from [Senator Allison] DeGazon indicating what they wanted to see in the amendment. After Blyden did not reach out, I told DeGazon that she should reach out to the St. Croix senators to discuss what they wanted to see. Of course everybody agreed," Mrs. Frett-Gregory said.

That fateful hearing would lead to protests from Juan F. Luis Hospital employees, [who in a video posted on The Consortium's Facebook platform](#), decried the measure and said funds from the \$39.5 million Medicaid reimbursement should be distributed to the territory's medical facilities. The video has been viewed over 45,000 times, and it changed the narrative instantly. The next day, the Senate Majority [moved to reorganize](#), removing Mrs. Frett-Gregory from the Finance Committee chair position.

"That's when folks started to change their direction," she said. "Nothing is wrong with constituents sharing their concerns and we hearing them and making the necessary changes."

Even so, the senator -- again pointing to Mr. Blyden's comments -- said it was time to move on. She said the 33rd Legislature is made up of many new politicians, which inevitably leads to mistakes. "We have to remember our administration is new and a number of new senators. That process will continue to flesh itself out as we continue our work.

"I will not allow anybody to change who I am when it comes to doing the work of the people. And I'm speaking up today because of the comments made by the Majority leader. I don't understand; it leaves me speechless," she continued.

"We need to stay focused as a body on what is important. I hope that this will finally put this to rest. Whether you are a member of the Majority caucus, aligned or minority, we need to continue to do the people's work. The people overwhelming voted for us in the November elections and people are looking for a difference and we have to make that happen. But to sit in a Senate and point fingers like the Majority leader did, it doesn't bode well.

"As the leader of the Majority, you should be the last person standing. You are the captain of the ship, you don't jump off your ship unless everybody's safe," Mrs. Frett-Gregory concluded.

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