

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Vote Down Bryan's G.E.R.S. Board And Coastal Zone Commission Nominees For Lack Of Preparedness, Knowledge On Relevant Issues

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While most of Governor Albert Bryan's recent nominees for board membership were approved by lawmakers on Thursday, senators who make up the Committee on Rules and Judiciary were swift in their decision to vote against two nominees forwarded to the Legislature for consideration by Mr. Bryan, citing the nominees' lack of preparedness and knowledge to serve on the Government Employees' Retirement System Board and the Coastal Zone Management Commission.

With G.E.R.S. just a few years away from collapse, senators said members of the board should be versed on matters critical to its survival, and the nominee, Vincent Joseph to serve on the GERS Board of Trustees for the St. Croix District, was woefully unprepared, senators found.

Senator Novelle Francis questioned Mr. Joseph on his qualifications, and Mr. Joseph pointed to experience in brokerage and trading stocks, and his seat on the Eastern Caribbean Friendship Committee Board. Mr. Joseph said his seat on the ECFCB forced him to "engage in a fundraising activity to which I had to do exchange of financing."

Mr. Francis pounced. "[Are] we serious? We're talking about \$4 billion" of G.E.R.S. unfunded liability. "We're talking about the need of an infusion of billions of dollars. We're talking that the G.E.R.S. is bleeding more money than it's taking in. And we want to compare the needs of G.E.R.S. with your trading and serving on the Eastern Caribbean Friendship Committee Board?"

Mr. Joseph tried to explain how his experience on the ECFCB would benefit G.E.R.S. if he were to be approved. "As a matter of fact with my experience sitting there, as you mentioned bleeding and \$4 billion you're trying to level which way we should go, whether it's up, down, or in between, sometimes you're faced with a situation that you're either going with the board. Best way, take advantage of the situation that you best see fit -- following your gut," Mr. Joseph said.

Mr. Francis was not impressed. "Mr. Joseph these are some serious issues and serious matters. I don't know if you understand the gravity of the situation plaguing G.E.R.S. and the awesome responsibility that you would have serving on the board to really defend some of the issues and concerns that's about to happen. There are some tough decisions that have to be made to determine the solvency of the system, or in fact to minimize the impact in terms of the insolvency by making some harsh, brash and difficult decisions moving forward."

Mr. Francis then asked Mr. Joseph whether he understood and was prepared for this responsibility, Mr. Joseph said yes.

Senators, however, were not convinced. Committee on Rules and Judiciary Chair, Sen. Janelle Sarauw, said, "Serious issues are facing G.E.R.S. and the board needs qualified persons to address them. Boards play a pivotal role in our government. Due to your inability to address the grave conditions of G.E.R.S., I am unable to vote in the affirmative."

Lawmakers also voted down the nomination of Edward Foerstal to serve as a member of the Virgin Islands Coastal Zone Management Commission in the St. Thomas-St. John District, due to his lack of preparedness and knowledge of matters concerning the board.

Senator Kenneth Gittens asked the nominee whether he had formal education or work experience specifically on environmental planning or construction. In response, Mr. Foerstal stated that he did not have any experience or educational background on the matter. Furthermore, despite learning of the nomination in June, Mr. Foerstal admitted that he did not attend CZM meetings or hearings, never researched the rules and regulations of the board, and was unfamiliar with the committees within the commission.

"Foerstal, you are not prepared," Mr. Gittens said bluntly. "At the very least you should have done your research. That would have been the icing on the cake.

Mr. Francis said, "I am not hearing your passion for actively engaging yourself to move the commission forward while protecting the best interest of all Virgin Islanders."

Separately, senators voted and approved the following nominations:

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