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James Calls for Immediate Hearings on Bill to Prevent Senators' Salary From Increasing to \$100,000 in January

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Senator Javan James By. BARRY LEERDAM FOR THE LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

Senator Javan James's amended that sought to untie senators' salary from the lowest paid commissioner's failed when the bill the amendment was supposed to be attached with was suddenly [pulled by its author, Athneil Thomas](#), during a session on Wednesday. Mr. James objected to the bill's removal in an effort to keep his amendment alive, but he only won the support of three lawmakers, namely Kenneth Gittens, Oakland Benta and Dwayne DeGraff. Some of the other senators have since argued that an issue with such consequence needed more than just an amendment.

To that end, Mr. James on Friday issued a release calling on Senate President Novelle Francis to immediately hold hearings for what is now BR 20-1357. The bill will seek to amend Title 2, Chapter 5, section 71 of the Virgin Islands code, which currently states: "Each member of the Legislature shall receive an annual salary in equal biweekly installments prorated from the date the member takes office to reflect the actual portion of the year the member actually serves, which salary shall be equal to the lowest annual compensation of the officers itemized in Title 3, section 29, Virgin Islands Code, as determined biennially on the date a majority of such members take office, provided..."

The goal of the measure is to strike the section of the code that reads, "which salary shall be equal to the lowest annual compensation of the officers itemized in Title 3, Section 29, Virgin Islands code."

Governor Albert Bryan has [raised the salary of the lowest paid commissioner](#), Calvert White of Sports, Parks and Recreation, by \$15,000 for an annual total beginning in January of \$100,000. If the law remains as is, the salary of the senators come January, 2021 will increase by \$15,000 as well. Bill Request 20-1357 would prevent the 15 senators from receiving that \$15,000 raise if adopted, Mr. James's office said in a release.

"The power to determine salaries of the senators should remain within the jurisdiction of the legislature. Article 1, Section 6 of the constitution states: The Senators and Representatives shall receive a Compensation for their services, to be ascertained by law (by the legislature), and paid out of the Treasury. Act 6905 has been a dark cloud over the U.S. Virgin Islands for far too long," said Mr. James.

He added, "I am not in support of senators receiving a raise in times like this. The Virgin Islands economy is struggling due to COVID-19 as our revenues are down. It would be completely irresponsible of us if we allow this raise to happen. My colleagues suggested that such a controversial bill should go through the vetting process, and my office is ready to have this well needed conversation on the senate floor. I am hoping that my colleagues with the wealth of legislative experience will come forward and support this measure by calling a legislative hearing immediately. All senators are welcome to amend the Bill Request 20-1357 as needed once legal counsel finalizes the Bill. We need to be selfless in these times and make decisions that are in the best interest of the people that we serve."

In a release issued Thursday, the leaders of the 33rd Legislature, including Mr. Francis, Senate Vice President Myron Jackson, and Majority Leader Marvin Blyden, [said they would move expeditiously to address the matter](#), and vowed to work with Mr. James, who has authorship of the measure.

"As leaders of the 33rd Legislature, we stand ready to work with the sponsors of the amendment and all people of good will to bring about a real solution to the issue of how we pay top officials in the government," said Mr. Francis. "We will move quickly to convene a session to make a determination regarding senators' salaries going forward, and we will also be revisiting the Public Officials Compensation Commission Act to determine if any tweaks are necessary to better safeguard the public interest."