The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bryan Encourages Senate to Approve Two-Year Budget, 'Chuckles' at GERS Complaints From Senate That Has Provided No Solutions, He Says

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Governor Albert Bryan during his inauguration in January 2019. By. REEMY-REEMZ PHOTOGRAPHY/VI CONSORTIUM

Governor Albert Bryan said during his press briefing Monday that he “thought it was a good thing” budgeting for the next two years, but the plan met a dead wall in the Senate last week, which prompted Mr. Bryan to highlight benefits of a two-year budgeting plan. He also addressed some concerns shared by lawmakers.

"It’s the first time in the history of the Virgin Islands that we have put in a two-year budget for consideration," the governor said. He then explained, “Let me show you why this makes sense. You cannot only plan for this year but you know what your outlook is for next year. We are able to make investors feel confident about putting in the money — you feel confident.”

The governor also sought to address senators' concerns relative to the separation of powers doctrine and the two-year budget, which without enabling legislation contravenes the Revised Organic Act of 1954, they said.

“The Revised Organic Act mandates that the governor of the Virgin Islands submit a budget annually in May. That’s all it says and we did. If the Legislature chooses not to approve a two-year budget then so be it, but the fact is we are thinking ahead and we would like them to help us do this too," Mr. Bryan said.

He added, “I want to assure the people of the Virgin Islands that the budget submitted by my administration meets all the requirements of the Revised Organic Act... I really would like to urge the Legislature to adopt this two-year budget.”

The governor touched on senators' talk of no funds being included in the budget for the Government Employees' Retirement System (G.E.R.S.), which he said made him chuckle as lawmakers had yet to come up with a plan for the failing pension system.

"The Legislature also made note that I didn’t send any funding for the GERS.... It always makes me chuckle because we have proposed at least three things," he said, including bond refinancing and legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes.

"All of this talk about funding the G.E.R.S. out of the general fund budget — it's just isn’t going to happen. We have to figure out a way to put some quick cash in there, refinance, and get a pension bond and put some more money in the G.E.R.S...."

Mr. Bryan last year proposed a debt restructuring plan that he said would have resulted in hundreds of millions of dollars in savings. Yet though he contended the funds would be used to undergird G.E.R.S., the governor also said a portion of the savings would have been expended on other priorities, including infrastructure.

Ultimately, senators rejected the plan, with some sticking to their stance that the measure was not in the best interest of the territory; some contending that the refinancing, contrary to what was being said, was not certain to go toward saving the G.E.R.S., while others, including Senator Kurt Vialet, contending that the deal — which would have dissolved the territory's $150 million Debt Service Reserve Fund — would affect future generations as it would have deferred payments and place a heavy burden on Virgin Islanders ten years down the road.