

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Extend State of Emergency to 2022, Pass 12 Bills Including Homeownership Measure and 8 Percent Pay Cut Restoration

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Lawmakers during a Senate session Tuesday passed twelve bills in a variety of areas that included repaying government employees who suffered the 8 percent pay cut in 2011; making homeownership more accessible; requiring people found guilty of abusing and neglecting children to seek counseling; and extending the Covid-induced state of the emergency through Jan. 10th, 2022, among other legislative action.

Legislators also confirmed Bosede Bruce as the commissioner of the Dept. of Finance and eight other individuals to a number of boards and a commission.

Senators approved Bill No. 34- 0077, an Act amending Act No.8365, the Fiscal Year 2021 Executive Budget and Act No. 8348, the Legislature's Fiscal Year 2021 Budget to restore the 8 percent reduction in salaries to employees of the Government of the Virgin Islands.

The Act's purpose is to repay by the end of the year government employees whose salaries were shaved by 8 percent through the Virgin Islands Economic Stability Act of 2011 (VIESA). An amendment was proposed by Senator Kurt Vialet to include employees of semi-autonomous entities such as the Juan F. Luis Hospital, the Schneider Regional Medical Center, Waste Management Authority, the University of the Virgin Islands and WTJX.

Governor Albert Bryan had proposed a similar bill, but senators cast it aside [for their own measure](#), contending that the Bryan measure, which sought to repay the funds in two fiscal years, was unnecessary.

Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory, who worked in government when the 8 percent pay cut was enacted, reminded her colleagues that in 2010 and 2011 there was a recession and there were two options: government employees either took the 8 percent cut or face mass layoffs. "It is our responsibility now as the economic condition of this territory has changed to return those funds to the government workers," she said.

Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger was the only lawmaker who voted against the restoration, contending that she did not see the Vialet-sponsored amendment until right before it was being voted on and felt was a violation of Senate rules.

More discussion on the bill can be found [here](#) when it was originally introduced in the Finance Committee.

Also approved was a Vialet-sponsored measure whose aim is to make the process of buying a home in the USVI more attainable for residents of the territory. The bill appropriates funding that is then made available through loans to serve as downpayment on a home. The bill, No. 34-0060, amends VI Code to enact the First-Time Homebuyers Program Act, making available \$4 million from the Internal Revenue Matching Fund to the Homestead and Home Loan Fund.

"This bill is going to supplement the down payment for individuals who cannot afford \$50,000, \$60,000, \$70,000 in downpayment," Mr. Vialet said."

Ms. Frett-Gregory stated, "We've worked diligently to make sure that we set aside funding to secure the opportunity for middle-income Virgin Islanders to secure their own home in the territory."

The bill was passed by a 13-0 vote. Senators Milton Potter and Janelle Sarauw were absent Tuesday.

More discussion on the measure can be found [here](#).

State of Emergency Extension Through Jan. 2022

The Covid-induced state of the emergency in the USVI was extended by senators to January 10th, 2022 after Bill No 34-0095 was amended and passed. The original proposed extension by the Bryan administration was through November 3, 2021.

Senator Kenneth Gittens, who made the motion to extend the state of emergency to Jan. 2022, said it was a waste of the Senate's time and taxpayer dollars to revisit the state of emergency "every 30 days."

Senator Marvin Blyden explained his support. "For a variety of reasons we are very much in the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially with the Delta variant right now and the recent surge makes it clear that we still have a long way to go," he said.

Despite voting in the affirmative, Senator Samuel Carrion voiced his concern relative to the status of some government departments and agencies whose enforcement personnel have been assigned to the Covid-19 Task Force.

"We find that in some areas of these departments and agencies within our community have been neglected by the absence of these enforcements," he said. Mr. Carrion said the matter needs to be addressed.

Mr. Johnson was the only senator to vote against the extension to Jan. 10, 2022.

Nominations

Ms. Frett-Gregory pointed out that a majority of the recent nominations were young professionals. "Gone are they days that we see the same individuals coming down for these boards and commissions," she said. "This block has young nursing professionals, it has a young doctor, two young accounts, a young lawyer, and an engineer."

She added, "While we continue to be challenged here in the territory, we've made great strides and our young people are doing great things."

The following nominations passed:

- Bosede Bruce - Department of Finance
- Deepak Bansal- Virgin Islands Board of Public Accountancy
- Brittany Dawson- Virgin Islands Board of Nurse Licensure
- Elizabeth Dumas- Virgin Islands Board of Nurse Licensure
- Dr. Chase Greep- Virgin Islands Board of Dental Examiners
- Celia Nurse- Virgin Islands Board of Nurse Licensure

- Akil Petersen- Virgin Islands Historic Preservation Commission
- Stephen Samuel- Virgin Islands Board of Architects, Engineers, and Land Surveyors
- Cherrisee Woods- Virgin Islands Parole Board

Additional measures passed:

- Bill No. 34-0004 - An Act amending title 33 Virgin Islands Code, subtitle 1, part 1, chapter 5, section 91 relating to the payment of fuel taxes to change the time for remittance of the tax to the Bureau of Internal Revenue; and for other related purposes
- Bill No. 34-0037 - An Act amending title 15 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 3, section 89, subsections (b) and (c) relating to decedents estate and payment of certain debts without administration to increase the aggregate amount that a surviving spouse may receive from debtors upon the death of the creditor and to increase the amount of debt a debtor must pay the survivors of a decedent creditor not less than thirty days after the creditor's death from not more than \$5,000 to not more than \$10,000
- Bill No. 34-0034 - An Act amending title 1 Virgin Islands Code by adding chapter 3A enacting the Uniform Electronic Legal Material Act, to provide for the management of electronic legal information in a manner that guarantees the trustworthiness of and continuing access to important government legal material
- Bill No. 34-0066 - An Act amending title 33, Virgin Islands Code, chapter 89 subchapter III, section 2541 to allow the Lt. Governor to collect unpaid property taxes and unpaid public sewer fees from the sale of delinquent taxpayer's real property
- Bill No. 34-0076 - An Act amending title 5, subtitle 1, part 1, chapter 3, to grant seniors and the terminally ill preference in civil action
- Bill No. 34-0058 - An Act amending title 17 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 34 by adding a subchapter III to establish the Virgin Islands Catalyst Fund to provide loans to eligible entities to promote economic resiliency, and to support the retention or creation of jobs, to provide for the University of the Virgin Islands Research and Technology Park Corporation to administer the program and the fund, and to provide criteria for making loans; and making \$5,000,000 appropriation to the Virgin Islands Catalyst Fund and a \$1,000,000 appropriation to the Economic Development Authority Enterprise Zone Program
- Bill No. 34-0030 - An Act amending title 4, Virgin Islands Code, chapter 11, section 172 relating to the Virgin Islands Superior Court's jurisdiction over children to divest the court of jurisdiction over judicial consent for the marriage of a child
- Bill No. 34-0031 - An Act amending title 14, Virgin Islands Code, chapter 24, section 504 relating to the penalties for child neglect to require the convicted person to attend counseling in addition to imprisonment or fine

- Bill No. 34-0032 - An Act amending title 14, Virgin Islands Code, chapter 24, section 505 relating to child abuse to require a person who abuses a child to seek counseling

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