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'It Can't Continue in Secret': Bill Calling for Transparency For Use of Federal Covid-19 Funds Takes Center Stage

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Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory announced today that Bill No. 34-0073 — which mandates transparency, accountability and oversight of federal Covid-19 relief and economic stimulus funds allocated to the territory — will be considered at the next legislative session.

The bill, sponsored by Ms. Frett-Gregory, is a move aimed at ascertaining all federal Covid-19 funding being spent by the government is managed in a transparent and, importantly, collaborative manner. Some lawmakers have been furious that Governor Albert Bryan [recently announced](#) \$1 million in funding for a public-private venture with the V.I. Diabetes Center of Excellence without the Senate being notified.

Senator Kurt Vialet in a press release called for transparency. And on Thursday, Ms. Frett-Gregory didn't mince words. She said while the administration has introduced a "broad plan" to the Legislature relative to the objectives for the \$584 million in Covid funds recently provided to the territory, "What needs to happen is we have to know what are those detailed uses of those funds, and whether or not we approve of it as a Legislature and as a community," she said.

"This ask is not unique to the Virgin Islands," Ms. Frett-Gregory continued, pointing to U.S. mainland governments where legislative approval is required before governors could expend federal dollars related to Covid-19. Governors, Ms. Frett-Gregory further stated, have taken legislatures to court but have wound up losing.

"The argument is going to be that we have a Revised Organic Act, but we cannot continue as leaders to fight on such matters," she said. "We should be collaborating because at the end of the day the people want to know the plan; it can't continue in secret." She said the governor did ask the Legislature for its input, but she contended that "we have to comprehensively approach what we want to see. It can't be we're given this bits and pieces, it has to be a comprehensive perspective."

The Senate president concluded by stating, "As legislators we have constituents as well, and we have a responsibility to look out for their best interest."

According to language found in the bill, "Not later than 30 days after the passage of this Act, the Governor of the Virgin Islands shall submit to the Legislature of the Virgin Islands, through the President of the Legislature, recommended allocations of federal funds designated for the Territory under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, for uses authorized by the act, including allocations for the funds in section of this act."

It for requires that, "Not later than 30 days after the passage of this act, the Governor of the Virgin Islands shall submit to the Legislature of the Virgin Islands, through the President of the Legislature, recommended allocations of any other federal funds and any unreleased federal funds designated for the Territory as a result of the coronavirus pandemic."

"The territory is in receipt of unprecedented sums of monies; it is critical that we utilize these dollars appropriately and effectively for the benefit of the people with the proper legislative oversight," stated the lawmaker. "The enactment of this bill puts a mechanism and a structure in place for both branches of government to work collaboratively to effectuate positive change in meeting the needs of our community, in addition to ensuring transparency and accountability."

"When it's all said and done, our territory must be better for what may very well be a once in a lifetime opportunity to rebuild our infrastructure, healthcare, educational system and our economy in a meaningful and systematic manner; we cannot squander this opportunity," Ms. Frett-Gregory concluded.