

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Frett-Gregory Calls For Her Bill That Removes Maintenance of Schools From Dept. of Education to be Reconsidered Following Protests

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Educators, nurses and regular citizens protested working conditions outside Gov't House on St. Croix on Wed. April 20, 2022. By. REEMY-REEMZ PHOTOGRAPHY/VICONSORTIUM

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory said late Wednesday that the protests on St. Croix and St. Thomas by members of the American Federation of Teachers further solidified her position that the construction and maintenance of the territory's schools should not continue to be the responsibility of the Department of Education.

Ms. Frett-Gregory's legislation to create the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance was defeated in the Committee on Education and Workforce Development on March 17 on a 3-3 vote with one abstention. Senators Kurt Vialet, Janelle Sarauw and Milton Potter voted against the measure.

The bill sought to create a bureau directly responsible for maintaining public school buildings, facilities, grounds and for the construction of new schools and facilities — concept that is not new and is currently utilized in school districts across the nation.

"Year in year out, our educational leaders attempt to balance the academic needs of our students with the needs of our school facilities — it has not worked. This is evident as our schools continue to remain in disrepair," stated Ms. Frett-Gregory. "The time is now for us as leaders to move in a new direction and take a chance on a new approach to resolving this vexing issue."

According to the senator, this new approach proposed in the legislation not only places the onus on the executive branch, but also the legislative branch to appropriate the funds needed to maintain schools. Across the nation, school districts have long moved away from maintaining and building new schools, shifting their focus on academic achievement. The proposed legislation is a product of three years of research and collaboration with stakeholders, Ms. Frett-Gregory said. During the March 17th hearing, testimony in support of Bill No. 34-0079 was offered by both the Board of Education and the Department of Education, and other stakeholders.

"We must get serious about the state of education in the territory. We cannot continue to hope for disaster dollars to build and maintain our schools," Ms. Frett-Gregory said. "Our schools have long been in disrepair and the hurricanes of 2017 have exacerbated the situation. As we are now in the construction phase of building new schools, absent of a plan, we will return to where we are today, schools in disrepair.

"We have to take a chance on a new approach, we are elected to find solutions, not to keep doing the same thing and expecting a different result. There is more than enough culpability to go around on this issue."

Mr. Vialet, before voting no during the March hearing, pointed out that the intent of the bill is excellent. "But the issue that I really have is it won't change anything; it's just taking one set of employees from here and you carrying them there ... is this the next level of bureaucracy or will it really drive change?" he questioned. Mr. Vialet was present at Wednesday's protest on St. Croix.

Ms. Frett-Gregory stated that if Wednesday's protests aren't reason enough to give reconsideration to Bill No. 34-0079, she doesn't know what is. "It is my fervent hope that as I continue to have discussions with my colleagues that they will see the vision of the legislation and work together towards reconsideration and eventual adoption. It is time of us to make tough decisions and take risks for the betterment of our people," she concluded.