The Virgin Islands Consortium

With Salaries as Low as $30,000 in Some Cases, Senators Push for Increase in Pay for Heavy Equipment Operators at Public Works

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When the Senate Committee on Finance met on Wednesday to continue 2023 budget hearings, the question of increased salaries for heavy equipment operators in the Department of Public Works dominated initial discussions among legislators.

Finance Committee Chair Senator Kurt Vialet argued that the current compensation offered to engineers, mechanics and other heavy-duty operators did not provide the government with a competitive advantage in hiring.

Senator Janelle Sarauw also questioned whether the department would be able to maintain their mechanics at the current salary, saying that with so many planned private sector construction projects, the Public Works Department was running the risk of losing their mechanics.

Ms. Sarauw urged Public Works Commissioner Derek Gabriel to speed up the negotiations which she claims have been in the discussion stages for about three years.

Mr. Gabriel, for his part, confirmed that the Public Works Department had been in talks with the Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Collective Bargaining about a pay raise for the entire heavy equipment division, whose salaries are as low as $36,000 a year in some cases. The commissioner said that the goal was to eventually move from that level toward a $60,000 - $70,000 starting salary. However, Mr. Gabriel said such a move would have “far reaching implications” with the entire bargaining agreement.

The pay disparity exists among workers who are exempt from union representation. In some cases, disparities exist between directors in different agencies within the territory.

The other main concern raised during that segment of Wednesday’s Finance Committee hearing is how the government would go about filling hundreds of vacant positions within the public sector.

Of the 1200 vacant positions projected for 2022, Mr. Vialet highlighted that the government had only been able to fill about 500.

Mr. Gabriel admitted that within the Public Works Department, not filling the existing vacancies had saved them $1.5 million dollars.

Mr. Vialet noted that DPW had been one of the largest government employers two decades ago, with over 700 employees. He contrasted that against today’s figures — fewer than 200 people, and aiming to fill just 23 vacancies by the end of this fiscal year.

The Bryan administration has recommended a total of $24.4 million to be allocated DPW from the General Fund. Fringe benefits account for a little over 15 percent of that amount.

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