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Violet Voices Disapproval of Election Board Members Openly Campaigning

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Senator Kurt Violet. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Governor hopeful and chairman of the Committee on Finance, Senator Kurt Violet has registered his disapproval of Board of Elections members being allowed to openly campaign during election season.

“If you are a board member, whether or not you are supporting somebody, you should refrain from wearing any type of paraphernalia throughout the campaign,” he insisted, saying that there are current board members publicizing their support for ruling governor Albert Bryan Jr.

He told election officials who appeared before his committee on Wednesday that it was sending a wrong message to voters who have historically been skeptical of the elections process.

“That sounds like something that we need to legislate,” he uttered, suggesting that the practice was so outrageous that strict measures needed to be implemented. “The board is a very important component and when a board member wears a candidate t-shirt, it is sending doubt in the voting population's mind that that person might be swayed in a particular direction.”

While Board of Elections Chairman Raymond J. Williams agreed that board members should remain impartial, he said legislating their conduct would infringe on their individual rights.

“Each member has their right to do as they so choose. It is our unsolicited practice generally not to do so,” he said in response to Mr. Violet who believes that board members should not adorn themselves in t-shirts indicating whom they support for governor.

Mr. Williams went further to assure the senator that members cannot directly affect the integrity of the elections process but acknowledged that their influence does have the ability to change the outcome of a voter's choice.

“That member doesn't have access to the voting system and process or operation,” he said. “What it probably does, and I agree, is that if I go out campaigning for candidate X, my influence makes a difference.”

The Board of Elections came before the Senate to request an additional \$125,000 to pay for cyber security, vendors and other Covid-related expenses as well as \$350,000 to cater for the possibility of a runoff election.

Supervisor of Elections Caroline Fawkes said the system had expended 99 percent of its original budget and would need these funds to ensure election takes place after bearing the cost of the primary a few weeks ago.

“We are still operating within the Covid protocol, these expenditures were not existing in the 2018 Elections, i.e., hand-washing stations, personal protective equipment, masks, sanitizing supplies and janitors on site to clean every machine and restroom facility after each individual usage, just to name a few additional expenses.”

Mr. Williams also advocated for an increase in salaries for election day officials.

“We paying people minuscule dollars to stand up, sit down, whatever for almost 17 hours, 14, 15 hours in a day and we're paying them nothing,” he remarked. An election day official can make anywhere from \$100 to a little over \$300.

As of August 12, 2022, 54,632 people have registered to vote in the November 8th elections inclusive of 26,265 on St Croix; 26,136 on St Thomas; and 2,292 on St John.

The Board of Elections is requesting \$2.7 million for fiscal year 2023 of which 40 percent will be spent on salaries and fringe benefits, and 48 percent on other services and charges. The requested budget is an increase of \$335,725 from its 2022 budget.