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Novelle Francis Chosen as New Senate President, Gittens as Majority Leader; Frett-Gregory to Chair Finance, Capehart to Chair Rules

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Democrats elected during the 2022 General Election and set to hold a majority in the 35th Legislature have decided on leadership in the upcoming Senate, with seasoned lawmakers along with a former senator being given important positions.

Senator Novelle Francis, who was Senate president in the 33rd Legislature, was chosen as Senate president for the 35th Legislature, Mr. Francis has confirmed to the Consortium. Senator Marvin Blyden has been chosen for vice president, while Carla Joseph was selected secretary, and Senator Kenneth Gittens majority leader.

Chairpersons for the two major committees — the Committee on Finance and the Committee on Rules and Judiciary — have also been chosen. Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, the current Senate president, was chosen as chair of the Committee on Finance, while Senator-elect Diane Capehart — [who was voted out in 2014 after a one-term stint](#) — was chosen as chair of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.

Senator-elect Marise James will chair the Committee on Education.

The leadership of the 35th Legislature is expected to issue a press release with the full list of committee assignments following the Jan. 9th swearing-in ceremony.

During an interview on Sunday, Mr. Francis spoke about his vision for the upcoming Senate with a keen focus on pressing issues facing the territory.

"We have some issues and concerns that need to be addressed. One of the things I intend to continue is the subcommittees that have been effective in resolving some of the issues such as the Government Employees' Retirement System, and the Fire EMS integration," stated Mr. Francis, who is currently serving as vice president of the 34th Legislature and received the second highest number of votes during the 2022 General Election's Senate race. "But I also want to be involved in some summits where we look at some economic development, we look at education, look at health care, and really bring all the stakeholders to the fold and get the public to be involved in some of these discussions and move some of those things forward."

With Democrats in power on both the legislative and executive levels, Mr. Francis envisions progress, but also intends to enforce checks and balances. "I believe that we have a Democratic platform that speaks to certain priority items and I truly believe that working with the administration to move those forward would be most critical," he said. "But we also have to understand that our role as a legislature is check and balance, and those things are critical. But I think that the public has a level of expectation and I certainly agree with it, where they want to see their elected leaders working in tandem, and working together to improve the quality of life and to really address some of the issues that are plaguing us. So not just the executive branch but also the delegate to Congress to move some of those things forward."

Mr. Francis spoke of the Rum Cover-Over funding issue, which has seen a drastic decrease — nearly \$60 million this year — in taxes collected annually on rum made in the USVI and sold in the US, because of a collection drop from \$13.25 per proof gallon to \$10.50. He also spoke of the importance of continuing to receive and use funding provided to the territory by the federal government tied to the 2017 hurricanes and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic.

"We have the WAPA crisis that's looming. I think that we can't have one speaking but as a collective we really have to speak to how we are going to come together to resolve those issues," he said.

Mr. Francis also highlighted infrastructure challenges and said the territory has a "good opportunity" to address those issues, including continued road paving and street lighting.

"Now that GERS is off the table, we can start to really focus on some of those other areas," he said, mentioning behavioral health as an issue "near and dear to my heart," which the senator said he hopes to see addressed meaningfully during the 35th Legislature and Mr. Bryan's upcoming second term.

The senator said though the aforementioned leadership and committee assignments were decided during a recent meeting, there could still be changes ahead of the new Senate's Jan. 9th swearing-

in ceremony (taking the oath of office).

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