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Three Virgin Islands Women Voted Into Key Government Roles

Government / **Published On December 14, 2022 05:57 PM /**

Elesha George **December 14, 2022**

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L2r: Leona Smith, Delia Thomas, and Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

The nomination of three women to high-ranking local government positions were approved by the Committee on Rules and Judiciary on Tuesday following an almost 12-hour session.

The nomination of Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington as commissioner of the V.I. Department of Education was met with resounding favor by both lawmakers and members of the department.

Mrs. Wells-Hedrington received a standing ovation from individuals on the Legislature's dock following her confirmation testimony.

“I think this is the first standing ovation we’ve ever had for a confirmation hearing,” remarked Milton E. Potter, chair of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.

Mrs. Wells-Hedrington, who last served as Dept. of Education chief operations officer during her three decades in the education sector, was nominated by Governor Albert Bryan Jr. in August 2022, a little over a month after the resignation of Racquel Berry-Benjamin who served in the position for three years from 2019.

Appointed just three days before the start of the 2022/2023 school year, she has the tremendous task of reversing education loss as a result of the 2017 hurricane season as well as the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Dept. of Education "is in a good place to change the face of education. With the federal funding received, we can finally fix the myriad of infrastructure issues focusing on life safety, security and code violations first," she said.

Having held several positions in education over the past 30 years, Mrs. Wells-Hedrington said she felt that she was well prepared to take on the role as commissioner of the department.

“The greatest benefit I bring is my knowledge of every aspect of this department and my ability to relate to situations in light of having walked the walk. As principal, I knew I had to support my teachers,” she said.

She spoke of changes that involved the assistance of educators, students and the community, technological changes, infrastructural upgrades as well as proper training and placement of teachers and students.

Parents, she said, will have the opportunity to pay all student fees online and a possible kiosk will be arranged for services, as well as a one-stop location to pay in cash.

According to Mrs. Wells-Hedrington, all policies and procedures relative to the financial aspect of the department will be updated and communicated to internal and external stakeholders where applicable by the end of 2023.

“Routine audits will be conducted to ensure compliance with internal controls. Proper accounting procedures, as well as fiscal transparency and accountability are at the forefront as we improve the fiscal responsibility of the department,” she added.

The Microsoft Teams platform will also be utilized, as well as SharePoint, to make the procurement processes more efficient.

Meanwhile, Ms. Delia Thomas is expected to take up the role as Inspector General at the Office of the Virgin Islands Inspector General.

She too has worked her way up in the department, starting as an entry level auditor with the Office in 1989.

For the past 33 years since then, she has moved up the ranks to Deputy Inspector General and has been serving in that position since 2002.

Her nomination was fully endorsed by Steven van Beverhoudt, the former Inspector General who said he immediately noticed her attention to detail when she was first hired. As deputy, Ms.

Thomas served as his assistance for 19 years until his retirement in 2021.

"During the years that I have known Delia, she has demonstrated the integrity and expertise needed to ensure that the Office of the Virgin Islands Inspector General maintains its independence and high level of professionalism expected of this office," he wrote in an endorsement letter to the Legislature.

She was also endorsed by Bernice A. Turnbull, who served as the Director of the Treasury Division and Commissioner of the Department of Finance, in which time she worked with Ms. Thomas over a 15-year period.

"She and the Inspector General Mr. Steven van Beverhoudt were able to change and implement several standing policies that served as a catalyst for better governance within the Government of the Virgin Islands," she wrote.

Those measures she noted created fewer audit findings which put the territory's government" in a better financial light/position."

Leona Smith was the last to be interviewed for her re-nomination to serve on the Virgin Islands Port Authority Board of Governors. She will serve for three more years in that position after lawmakers voted five to two in favor of her appointment.

Ms. Smith has worked in the government service for over 25 years and is a member of the Government Employees' Retirement System (GERS) board.