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V.I. National Guard Pension Set for Significant Increase as Senate Committees Vote in Favor

Government / **Published On May 11, 2023 05:18 AM /**

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Two Senate committees have now voted in favor of an amended bill to increase the retirement pension for the Virgin Islands National Guard.

As former V.I. National Guard member Senator Dwayne DeGraffe explained to the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance on Tuesday, “This bill seeks to increase the retirement pension from \$100 per month to \$200 per month. The Virgin Islands National Guard members would have to spend 20 years in the National Guard and before they can collect a pension they would have to wait until they make 60 years old.”

In urging his colleagues to support the bill, Mr. DeGraffe impressed upon them the importance of the contributions of members of the National Guard. He observed that incidentally, May 9th – the

day on which the bill came before the Budget Committee – marked the 38th anniversary of the date he joined the National Guard.

While Adjutant General of the V.I. National Guard Major General Kodjo S. Knox-Limbacker commended the government for the current monthly payment of \$100, he expressed support for the proposed increase, saying that to meet the original extent of the bill, the pension rate should be set even higher, at \$300. According to the Major General, “\$100 in 1982 when the bill was originally passed is equal to \$320.87 in 2023.”

During his testimony before the committee, Mr. Knox-Limbacker emphasized, “I’m pleased to say the Virgin Islands has gone above and beyond to recognize and support our veterans in the past. This measure to increase the payment from \$100 to \$200 is not only honorable, but needed for some of these veterans.”

Director of the Office of Management and Budget Jenifer O’Neal also testified before the committee on Tuesday, noting that OMB is currently finalizing the proposed budget for fiscal year 24/25 and the line item for the pension fund has been budgeted at \$60,000. According to Ms. O’Neal, to account for the proposed increase in pensions, the budget for the fund would also need to be raised, to at least \$108,000. She described the increase as “minimal,” particularly in light of the significant sacrifices that VI Guard members and their families make over a 20-year career. She firmly expressed her support for the proposal, recommending the relevant increase to accommodate the measure.

As members of the committee discussed the bill, Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, the chair, asserted, “I believe this is a no brainer.” The sentiment was shared by Sen. Marvin Blyden who stated that he sees no reason why it should not be increased, noting “it’s been over 40 years since it has been at the \$100.”

During the discussions, Ms. Frett- Gregory circled back to the Major General’s observations that \$100 does not look the same as it did 40 years ago. She subsequently asked that one of her Senate colleagues make a voice amendment to increase the pension payment to \$300, as opposed to the initial recommendation of \$200. “We gotta do the right thing, we have to. We talking about \$60,000 more, give or take,” she said.

The amendment was duly proposed by Senator Novelle Francis and immediately seconded by several of his colleagues. Senator Ray Fonseca voiced that he strongly supports an increase to \$300, affirming, “Our National Guard members, they risk their lives, they dedicate, they serve the community.” He added, “That’s small change in the scheme of the billions we deal with here in this Legislature and what better cause than to give this financial assistance to our esteemed members of the Virgin Islands National Guard.”

Following these deliberations, Mr. De Graffe expressed his pleasure at the decision of his colleagues, proudly stating, “It warms my heart so much, wow, I’m basically speechless.”

The bill was then moved to a vote, having been amended to reflect an increase of \$300 instead of \$200. The Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance voted in favor of the bill as amended and it was thus forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

On Wednesday, the amended draft legislation came before that committee, where Senator DeGraffe once more urged support for the pension increase. All members of the Rules and Judiciary Committee who were present expressed support for the bill, with Chair Sen. Diane

Capehart stating simply, “These are individuals that serve our community, retired, and I think that they deserve that increase.”

Senator Marise C. James added her voice to the conversation, expressing, “Of course that’s close to my heart and I definitely commend my fellow veteran colleague on St. Thomas for being vigilant about getting this done for the past few years and making it happen. And so I was happy to join him in sponsoring this bill.”

Following the reading of the bill which came out of the Budget committee on Tuesday, Senator Angel Bolques presented an additional amendment authored by himself and Senators Blyden, De Graffe and Milton Potter, which bumps the pension payment up to \$350 from \$300, and adds a sentence mandating future increases every five years to reflect changes in inflation. The bill as amended was favorably voted upon by the Committee on Rules and Judiciary and forwarded to the full Senate for further consideration and action.

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