

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill From Gov. Bryan Seeks to Streamline Procurement Process as Territory Makes Preparation to Receive Billions in Federal Dollars

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Dept. of Property and Procurement Commissioner Anthony Thomas By. VI
LEGISLATURE

Before he testified during the Senate Committee of the Whole on Wednesday, Property and Procurement Commissioner Anthony Thomas [had already been making the rounds](#) on a number of media outlets promoting vast changes he and his team at P&P had made in one year. The changes were aimed at preparing the U.S. Virgin Islands as it gets ready to receive roughly \$8 billion over the coming years in federal disaster recovery

dollars, all of which must pass through Property and Procurement.

On Wednesday, the Bryan administration showed that it was serious about those changes, some already in place, and more yet to come, through proposed legislation to the territory's procurement process. Through Bill No. 33-0269, procurement would change in a number of ways. For one, it would allow government departments and agencies within the executive branch to authorize purchases of up to \$50,000. Currently, all purchases, even those as small as a few hundred dollars, must go through P&P, something the department sees as red tape that bottlenecks processes that are supposed to be swift.

To that end, the department, within its Office of Procurement, Contract Management and Reporting (OPCMR), has successfully trained individuals in these government arms to complete contracts of \$50,000 or less. Those certified to manage the contracts will need re-certification every year for the first two years. Following the two-year period, those persons certified will need to re-certify every two years once P&P has the necessary assurances that the agency or department has the requisite capacity to successfully procure goods and services in accordance with the procurement statute.

The measure also seeks to change language relative to bidding for government contracts from "competitive bidding" to "competition". According to Mr. Thomas, "This change is necessary because the statute requires various forms of competition not just competitive bidding. In addition, the proposed amendment will revise the language of the provision so that it broadly addresses competition rather than just competitive bidding."

P&P sees language in the current law relative to advertising as archaic. As it stands now, the law only provides for the use of "newspapers of general circulation" for advertising bids and other solicitations. "However, newspapers of general circulation have a narrow definition in current Section 251, which does not comport with today's reality. As we attempt to digitize the Government, we must utilize electronic means of advertising; particularly where and when it is more economically feasible," Mr. Thomas said.

The commissioner said the main problem relative to implementing and sustaining the system was making sure that Virgin Islanders were in place to carry out the tasks. And he was determined to hire local, with a deep conviction that if people are trained, they will perform — a conviction he said has proven true. Mr. Thomas became emotional to the end of his testimony, and while talking about the results he has seen during and following training.

"I am sorry to be emotional, but [during the training] it was like someone been in the desert and you give them water... This is the best thing that could have happened. We have invested in them and they have responded well," an emotional Thomas said.

He added, "You can't continue to tell a people that they are unable and they are no good. They never function. We decided to train our own and we are confident with the right support they could accomplish anything."

Another major change, which Mr. Thomas said instantly saves the government millions of dollars while improving delivery from days and sometimes weeks, to seconds, is by using electronic means to notify upcoming solicitations to preferred bidders. The government

has had to notify preferred bidders through regular mail; the bill calls for the abandonment of this method.

The legislation also includes language that would give local contractors a fair shot at securing major contracts, even as such provisions are written in such a form that they do not compromise the necessary requirements for federal funding. This is important because, according to Mr. Thomas, "70 percent of monies coming into the territory is from the federal government."

A lot of the modernization at P&P is through a system the government has been paying \$3.5 million to use annually for years, but had never fully taken advantage of its features. The SharePoint software, a Microsoft product, offers deep and intelligent integration within various categories that makes it the right fit for a government that seeks to communicate seamlessly without bottlenecks, while handling a myriad of tasks. One possible reason for the minimal use, Mr. Thomas said, is because people are oftentimes uncomfortable with change.

But such fear, he suggested, ends with his tenure.