

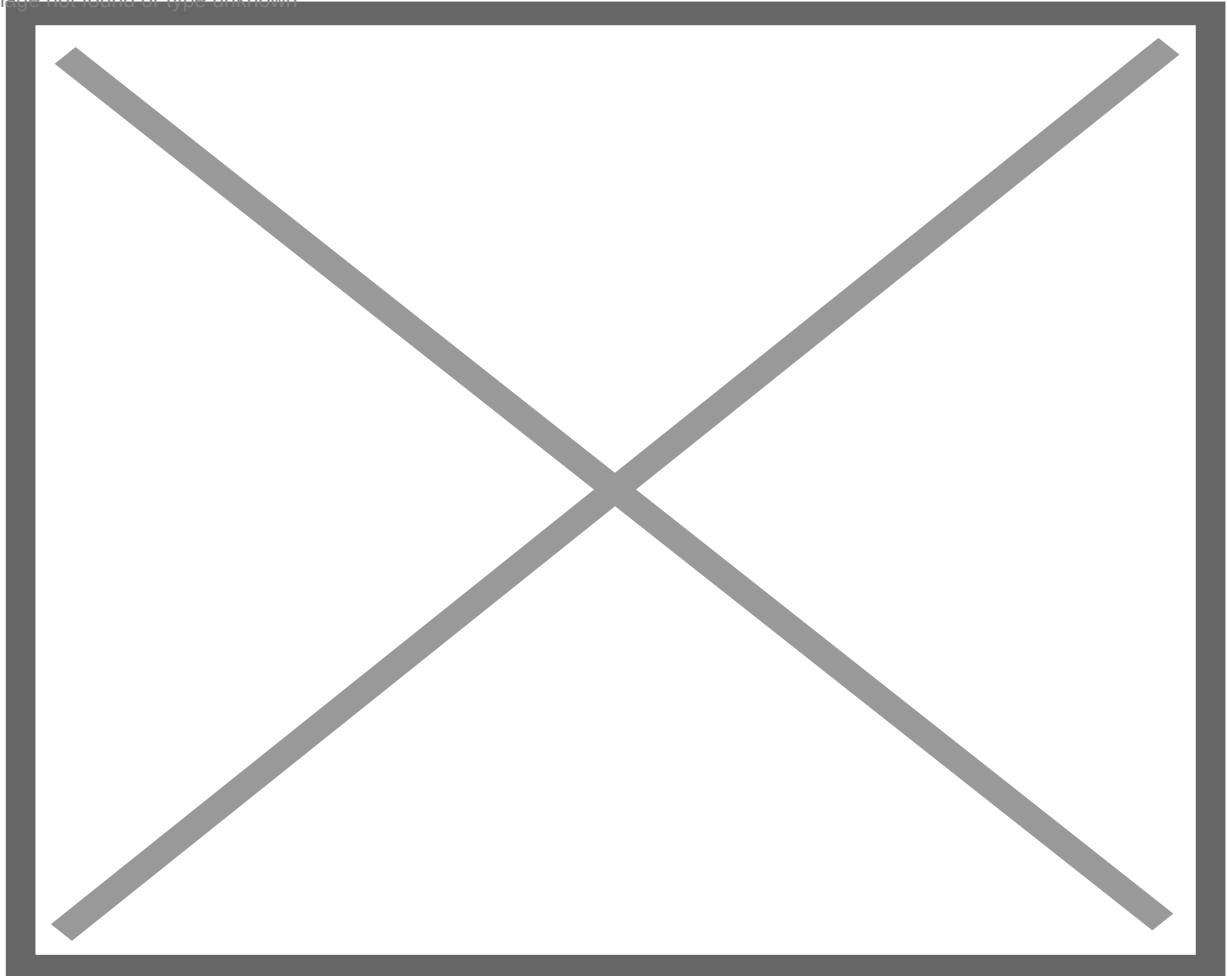
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Bolques Roasted by Colleagues, Forced to Withdraw Governors' Day Bill, Measure to Name National Dish

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Janeka Simon **July 21, 2023**

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Senator Angel Bolques, Jr. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Proposed legislation to create official recognition for governors of the Virgin Islands was withdrawn by its sponsoring lawmaker.

Bill 35-0075, which would designate the third Monday in February as Virgin Islands Governor's Day, faced significant opposition when it came up for debate in the Committee of the Whole's legislative session on Thursday.

Senator Alma Francis Heyligher was scathing in her criticism of the proposed measure, which was brought forward by Senator Angel Bolques Jr. "I don't know if the author knows his worth, but we are all co-equal branches of government," she declared. She also noted that while the third

Monday in February is colloquially known as President's Day, the legal holiday is specifically to celebrate the birthday of one former president – George Washington. “Unfortunately, when I tried to share my thoughts with the author that Presidents' Day does not exist, he wasn't even aware...so even the way this law is written is incorrect.”

Drafting errors notwithstanding, Ms. Francis-Heyliger also expressed her philosophical objections to the measure. “We are public servants to the people,” she said, arguing that the leaders of the three co-equal branches of government do not need any special thanks or recognition to do their jobs. “We don't have a problem with honoring people when they've done something,” the senator said, noting that former Governor Cyril E. King's birthday is celebrated “because we hand-picked a governor that was exceptional.” She objected, however, to doing it across the board. “I am vehemently opposed to this piece of legislation.”

“What I'd support more than anything else is a governors' museum where we could be able to archive all of the important documentation of the governors throughout the territory,” said Senate President Novelle Francis. “I don't know that Governor's Day will really mark the importance of our governors,” he argued.

“We have a whole month that we celebrate Virgin Islands history,” said Senator Kenneth Gittens, suggesting that governors could be celebrated during that time, instead of creating a new law specifically for the purpose. “Honestly colleagues, we got a lot more important things and pressing things to deal with,” he continued. “We got hospitals.”

At first, Bolques decided to ask that the measure be sent back down to committee to be further worked on, but in the face of further criticism from Francis Heyliger, the motion was amended to have the bill held indefinitely.

The measure that would have instructed the Department of Tourism to conduct a territory-wide survey for the purpose of soliciting votes on a national dish for the Virgin Islands was also withdrawn by Bolques.

During debate on Bill 35-0078, senators registered their objections on two fronts – opposition to the concept of over-legislation, and opposition to the idea that the territory's national dish could be decided, as a result of the survey, to be anything other than fish and fungi.

Francis Heyliger spoke stridently against the measure, saying that it was a heavy-handed approach to a simple question. “I don't know about you, but if you wish to open up the Virgin Islands code book to see the Legislature asking to do a survey, and it will forever be written in our code - it is quite ridiculous,” she argued, especially since the relevant agency was willing to conduct the survey on the strength of a simple request from the legislative branch. “We do not need to be constantly over-legislating, that is not our job,” said the senator.

Senator Carla Joseph said she believed that the idea of conducting a territorial survey was “more an administrative activity that the Department of Tourism can take charge of without us having to qualify it.”

When it came to the idea of what the U.S. Virgin Islands' national dish should actually be, lawmakers shared strong sentiments.

“Fish and fungi should be the order of the day,” declared Senator Francis. “I think that fish and fungi represents the entire territory.”

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory concurred. “Our official dish is fish and fungi. We do not need a survey to determine that our official dish is fish and fungi,” she argued. Whether a Virgin Islander is a resident of St. Croix, St. Thomas or “Saint John, is fish and fungi,” she contended. “Just bring the bill that says fish and fungi and we’ll go with that.”

Meanwhile, Senator Javan James Sr. provided a historical perspective. Reading from an article published in the New York Times, James noted that the consumption of fish and fungi by the enslaved African ancestors of many Virgin Islanders dates back to the 18th century. Citing the writing of professor Neville Hall, James said that okra was added to the cassava or cornmeal rations handed out to the enslaved workers to provide additional nutritional value, an earthy flavor, and extra bulk to the resulting dish.

When it came time to a vote, Gittens inquired whether it would be possible to gut the proposed legislation to insert an amendment that would simply declare fish and fungi the national dish of the U.S. Virgin Islands. However, he was informed that this would change the intent of the bill currently before the body, and thus would not be able to do so.

Ultimately, Bolques requested that this matter also be withdrawn from consideration by the Committee of the Whole, a request that was granted by his colleagues.