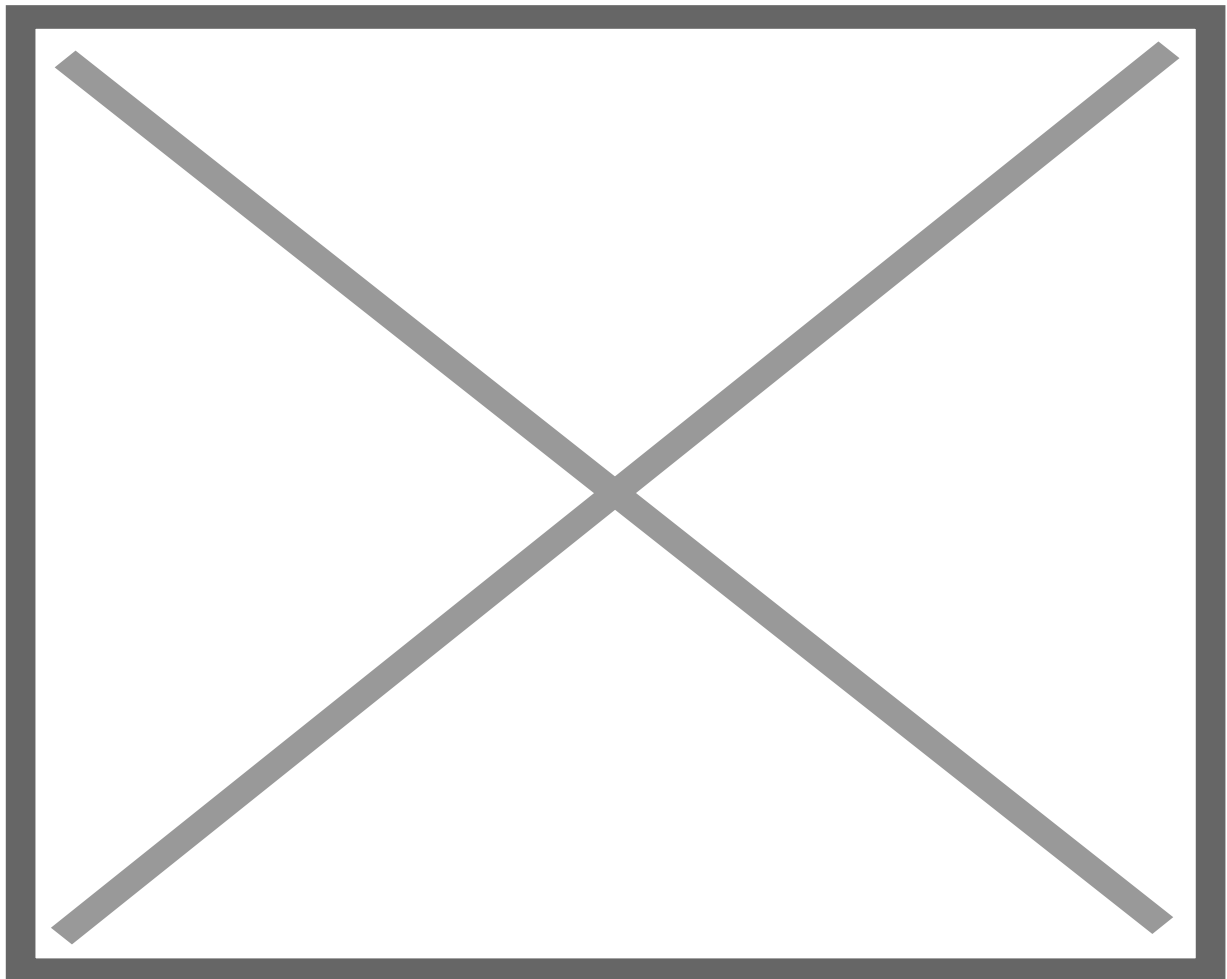


# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## Debate Over Election Integrity Spills Into Budget Hearing; Election System Says OMB Violated Law With Latest Funding Proposal

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**Election Supervisor Caroline Fawkes. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE**

Much of the testimony and resultant discussion when elections officials came before the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance last week should have been reserved for a different committee hearing.

Finance chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory made the observation more than once during the second block of Friday's Senate session, to which Board of Elections chair Alecia Wells and Elections Supervisor Caroline Fawkes were invited.

Ms. Wells began the segment by reading a four-paragraph statement compiled by the board, in which the body reiterated its confidence in the integrity of the 2022 election cycle, "using its triple redundancy accuracy protocol." The statement characterized those with questions or complaints about the process as "candidates suffering the agony of defeat," and said that the board's rejection of those complaints came after "keen review of the Superior Court's established law on VI elections."

The statement read by the Board of Elections chair went on to discuss accusations against the election system being made on local talk shows, which she said included attacks on the sitting senator-at-large's eligibility to hold that position. In contrast, Ms. Wells mentioned how election systems in neighboring islands like Tortola had consulted the Elections System of the Virgin Islands (ESVI), seeking to learn from the body.

The board's statement also revisited the viral video that accused a deputy supervisor of elections of hiding votes. Ms. Wells emphatically dismissed the claim as absurd, saying that both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the ESVI had cleared the woman in question beyond reasonable doubt. "She continues to suffer pain...she's being held hostage a lot of times at her house," Ms. Wells said of the employee.

The elections supervisor also drew attention to the issue of elections officials being targeted for what she described as baseless skepticism and scrutiny rising to the level of malice. "A new Brennan Center poll finds that election officials are under attack and leaving their jobs." Early last year, 600 local elections officials were surveyed, and "their responses should set off warning bells across all levels of government and provoke action from Congress and local legislatures," according to Ms. Fawkes, because "more than half of the respondents are concerned about the safety of themselves and their colleagues." The territory has also become drawn into this ugly national phenomenon, Ms. Fawkes alleged. However, there are plans to combat the deluge of attacks and misinformation, she told lawmakers.

Ms. Fawkes then spoke about the focus of Friday's hearing - proposed budgets for the Election System and the Board of Elections. The Board is requesting just under \$430,000, representing an increase of more than twice last year's budget figure. The majority of the money will be spent on travel, said Ms. Wells, responding to an inquiry from Senator Donna Frett-Gregory. "The travel between the Virgin Islands and anyplace stateside is now upwards of \$3,000," Ms. Wells explained. "Although we do online training, most of the training expects us to be in person...each board member can apply for and go to two trainings per year."

The Elections System needs an allocation of \$3 million this fiscal year, said Ms. Fawkes, \$500,000 more than what the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) had submitted to the Legislature on behalf of ESVI. "How can the actual for FY 22 state we expended over \$2,700,000 and we are here today with a proposal of \$2,500,000?" she asked, arguing in favor of the expanded allocation. "We cannot continue to enhance our processes and our equipment for the public while our proposed budget is stagnant, or decreasing," Ms. Fawkes continued. Key expenditures for the agency were not considered in the proposal sent down by OMB, including already-approved raises for three managerial staff members, and a new vacancy which they are hoping to fill soon. According to Ms. Fawkes, OMB's proposed budget violates the section of Title 18 of the VI Code that

mandates salary increases every two years for certain elections officials.

Senator Angel Bolques Jr, the at-large representative who has been attracting the challenges over residency eligibility referred to by Ms. Wells, questioned Ms. Fawkes about how the chronic underfunding of her agency has affected operations. She responded by outlining the ways in which costs have risen and how budgetary gaps have been filled with a continuous scramble for federal grant money. Mr. Bolques also asked about future plans to purchase buildings to mitigate rental costs, but Ms. Fawkes expressed doubt. "Senator, I've been hearing this talk for 40 years of my life and so until the government show me the building, I can't comment on that," she said.

With 2024 being an election year, and separate to ESVI's operational budget, Ms. Fawkes has also requested \$950,000 to conduct elections in said year: \$350,000 for the primaries and \$600,000 for the general election. She emphasized that election cycles begin after the primary and late funding would hamper preparations. Ms. Fawkes also expressed frustration with the loss of over \$189,000 at the end of FY 22 and called for legislation to make funds available until expended, something which with Senator Frett-Gregory agreed.

The elections supervisor provided voting registration statistics: 35,009 active registered voters across the territory, (14,508 STX, 19,173 STT, 1494 STJ), and 20,319 inactive registered voters (12,067 STX, 7432 STT, 820 STJ). The Elections Supervisor directed citizens to the ESVI [website](#), where they can check their status, register to vote, and learn how to reactivate an inactive status. An expanded database that can check death records not only on the mainland, but in the wider Caribbean, is also in the cards, to help with keeping the voters list accurate and updated. Ms. Fawkes also focused on the need for more forums and town halls, reporting that citizens were requesting more of these opportunities to engage with elections officials. She noted that these activities carried with them their own funding requirements, with costs including location rentals, sound systems, promotion, and live streaming.

A question over who exactly was responsible for vetting the eligibility and legitimacy of candidates led to a somewhat contentious exchange between Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger and Ms. Wells. Sen. Frett-Gregory waded in and ultimately was able to get Ms. Wells to explicitly state that it is the elections supervisor who is responsible for such vetting.

Towards the end of the hearing, Ms. Frett-Gregory expressed frustration with the diversion from budget matters and emphasized the need to stay focused on the budget cycle, suggesting that much of Friday's discussion should have been had under the aegis of the Rules and Judiciary Committee. However, she thanked ESVI staff and Board of Elections members for the work they do in keeping democracy in the territory functional. "We know that we do not have a perfect universe wherever we go," said Frett-Gregory. "We are here to support the work that you do."