

COMMITTEE ON RULES AND JUDICIARY APPROVES FIVE NOMINEES

Date : April 2, 2019



ST. THOMAS, U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS – Five cabinet nominees selected by Governor Albert Bryan were confirmed before the 33rd Legislature’s Committee on Rules & Judiciary during confirmation hearings chaired by Senator Alicia V. Barnes on Thursday, March 28, and Friday, March 29 at the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall in St. Thomas.

The approved nominees are Justa Encarnacion, Department of Health, Positive T.A. Nelson Department of Agriculture, Nelson Petty, Jr., Department of Public Works, Jean-Pierre L. Oriol, Department of Planning and Natural Resources, and Racquel Berry-Benjamin, Department of Education.

Department of Health Commissioner Nominee Encarnacion earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing and served as the first Health Supervisor at the University of the Virgin Islands’ St. Croix Campus. Encarnacion’s short-term goals include the development of a U.S. Virgin Islands

Health Plan by conducting a health needs assessment with the input of all stakeholders to improve the overall performance of public health. Long-term goals include the opening of a 40-bed residential behavioral health facility on St. Croix, to include the return of patients receiving care off-island.

Senator Barnes asked about emergency planning relative to patient evacuees and managing databases in the wake of another natural disaster. During a line of questioning, Senate President Kenneth L. Gittens asked the nominee if the department had looked into placing EMT's at fire stations to reduce ambulatory response times. Commissioner Nominee Encarnacion stated that meetings and conversations have started. Senator Janelle K. Sarauw asked about the status of the dental clinic in the territory and if community health clinics were operational. Commissioner Nominee Encarnacion said that while the dental clinic was taken out of the budget, agencies have expressed interest in continued collaboration with the Frederiksted and East End Health Centers.

Commissioner Nominee Nelson of the Department of Agriculture earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Accounting and has eight years of crop farming, landscaping, and horticulture experience. His goals include revisiting and updating the Strategic Plan for Sustainable Agricultural Development and Advancement, improving infrastructure, pursuing additional funding sources, and establishing a deeper partnership with the University of the Virgin Islands.

Senator Novelle E. Francis, Jr. asked about fund capitalization, assistance with facility rehabilitation, and how much funding local farm industries received. Nelson said two million dollars have been utilized thus far.

Commissioner Nominee Oriol earned a degree in Biology and began his work at DPNR as an inspector at the Division of Coastal Zone Management. His short-term goals include resolving staffing issues, addressing repairs at DPNR's St. John office through a bid process, and providing permittees with standardized permit placards. Long-term goals include the development of comprehensive Island-Specific land use plans, and the implementation of an electronic permitting system.

Senator Dwayne M. DeGraff asked about his plans for DPNR for the next six months. Oriol listed staffing, making inspections, and having vehicles for inspectors as top priorities. Senator Barnes asked about the recent issues with CZM permits for the racetrack, how it was resolved, and if there's a strategy in place to ensure that it won't happen again. Oriol said the matter was resolved and permits were signed, and that legal opinions are being taken into consideration.

Commissioner Nominee Nelson Petty, Jr. earned a degree in Civil Engineering and started his career as a registered professional engineer with the Department of Public Works. Petty also founded his own engineering and surveying company. One of Petty's goals is to "manage the community's expectations with regards to expending federal funds to address repairs to our infrastructure," and to attract more community and business involvement.

Committee members asked about overall safety issues, the VITRAN system, traffic and parking concerns, leadership roles on each island and specifics on projects such as the La Reine Fish Market.

Commissioner Nominee Racquel Berry-Benjamin earned a bachelor's degree, two Masters' Degrees, and is a Doctoral Candidate. She appeared before the committee a second time and

passed, along with the other members nominees during this two-day period, to the full body with favorable recommendations.