

## LAWMAKERS VOTED TO HOLD IN COMMITTEE FOUR OUT OF FIVE BILLS

**Date :** October 30, 2019

St. Thomas- Members of the Committee on Finance chaired by Sen. Kurt Vialet, convened in a meeting at the Capitol Building on Wednesday and voted to hold in committee bills regarding the Virgin Islands National Guard, the Government Retirement System, and Government credit cards. However, senators approved the measure for the St. Croix Capital Improvement Fund. All approved items will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

Representatives from the Virgin Islands National Guard were absent despite being notified to testify on the measures a month in advance. Sen. Vialet said, "I am very surprised that the leaders of the National Guard are not here. We have several bills on the agenda that addresses some of the challenges they are facing. However, there are difficulties in getting the National Guard to attend the meetings." As a result, senators voted to remove off the agenda until the call of the Chair: Bill No. 33-0034 -An Act amending Title 23, chapter 19, subchapters I and III of the Virgin Islands Code relating to benefits and insurance coverage for officers and members of the National Guard of the Virgin Islands to provide for pay comparable to those serving in the armed forces of the United States and to ensure that the territorial active-duty members have insurance to cover any illness or injury sustained while on active duty not covered by other health insurance coverage.

Afterward, [lawmakers voted to hold in committee at the call of the Chair](#), Bill No. 33-0007. The measure seeks to increase the retirement pension from \$100 to \$200 for members of the Virgin Islands National Guard. Sponsor of the bill, Sen. Dwayne DeGraff said, "The measure is specifically for part-time soldiers who served for 20 years in the reserves. It is a small supplemental income for soldiers ages 55-60 until they are eligible to collect a pension." Due to the absence of the

leadership of the V.I. National Guard and the inability to identify a funding source for the increase, the bill will remain in committee. Sen. Violet mentioned that there aren't enough funds in the FY 2020 Budget for the Virgin Islands National Guard to sustain the increase.

Moreover, senators voted to hold in committee: Bill No. 33-0042- An Act amending Title 20, chapter 39, section 433, subsection (c) of the Virgin Islands Code, providing that \$10 of each operator's license renewal fee must be remitted to the Government Employees' Retirement System, and providing that the GERS must use that money towards the reduction of its unfunded liability. The Bureau of Motor Vehicles Director Barbara Jackson-McIntosh indicated that she does not support the measure because of the financial need to complete critical projects such as architectural drawings, engineering, and the construction of building new offices destroyed by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Sen. Violet said, "The intent of the bill is good. However, the FY 2020 budget was passed and legislation that alters the budget can result in unfunded mandates."

Senators voted to hold in committee at the call of the Chair: Bill No. 33-0069- An Act amending Title 3, chapter 1 of the Virgin Islands Code relating to the issuance of and usage of government credit cards. The Department of Property and Procurement (DPP) Commissioner Anthony Thomas noted that DPP does not support the measure because legislation is not required to monitor government credit cards and the Department of Finance should continue to be responsible for the issuance of credit cards; not the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). OMB Director Jenifer O'Neal concurred, and expressed the need to provide training for the Executive Branch focused on best practices for the use of credit cards. Separately, senators voted and approved: Bill No. 33-0199- An Act making an appropriation of appropriates \$3,800,000.00 from the St. Croix Capital Improvement Fund to be used as matching funds to acquire federal funds under the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant award for the St. Croix Molasses Pier Enhancement Project.

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