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Governor Bryan Thanks Legislature for Allowing Administration to Clarify Contract Award Process

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS – Governor Albert Bryan Jr. on Wednesday thanked members of the 33rd Legislature who participated in the Senate’s Committee of the Whole hearing about the contract negotiations between the Virgin Islands Department of Health and Avera to provide contact-tracing services during the COVID-19 epidemic.

“I would like to commend the Legislature for its diligence in clarifying the steps that were taken and putting to rest any further rumors or misinformation about the contract award process proscribed by the V.I. Code,” Governor Bryan said after the hearing. “The application of checks and balances between branches of government, although sometimes frustratingly politicized, is a fundamental and essential part of our form of government and we respect that process.”

During a 7-hour hearing on St. Thomas on Wednesday, the Senate Committee of the Whole heard testimony from a half-dozen members – and members of their staffs – of the Bryan Roach Administration: Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion; Property & Procurement Commissioner Anthony Thomas; Public Finance Authority Executive Director Nathan Simmonds; DPNR Commissioner Jeanne-Pierre Oriol; Office of Disaster Recovery Director Adrienne Williams-Octalien; and Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority Executive Director Daryl Griffith.

In addition to inquiring about the process of the Department of Health negotiating with Avera about an agreement to conduct contact-tracing services, senators also had questions about an agreement through DPNR for The Strategy Group to distribute about \$10 million in federal funds to fishers for damages to their businesses from the hurricanes of 2017.

Regarding that agreement, Commissioner Oriol reiterated previous testimony he gave last month that there is no contract with DPNR, and The Strategy Group was awarded a subcontract by Witt O'Brien's following a thorough bid award process.

During her testimony, Commissioner Encarnacion described the process the Department of Health followed after issuing a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a contact-tracing app to assist the department in its efforts to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of three companies that asked for RFP applications, only Avera responded. The proposal presented by Avera has since been rejected and the Department of Health has received six responses to the reissued RFP, the Health commissioner said.

"I'd like to thank the 33rd Legislature for its thoroughness and determination in conducting its administrative and legislative duties to examine every aspect of the contract discussions between Avera and Health," Governor Bryan said. "The Senate's meticulous and comprehensive fact-finding resulted in the public having a clear knowledge that there was no wrongdoing and no steps were skipped in the contract process for the government."

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