

[The Pointer Sisters'
"Yes We Can Can" plays]
Now's the time for all good men
to get together with one
another.
We got to iron out our problems
and iron out our quarrels and
try to live as brothers.
And try to find peace within...
>> Good day! Good day.
You're listening to
"Ability Radio."
I'm one of your hosts, Amelia
Headley LaMont, and we're coming
to you from the Disability
Rights Center of the Virgin
Islands.
I am joined today by a very
special guest, Former Supervisor
of Elections, John Abramson.
Good morning.
>> Good morning, and thanks for
having me.
>> And I'm also joined today by
one of our staff people, one of
our attorneys, Kippy Roberson.
Good morning.
>> Good morning.
>> One of things I'd like to
bring to our audience's
attention is that one of the
grants that we work on falls
under voting, particularly the
grant that we have that's called
"Help America Vote," which came
to us during the -- I believe it
was the 2010 general election.
Don't quote me on that.
But, in any event, it was viewed
that persons with disabilities
also have a right to be
represented and to have their
views respected and honored.
And so in light of that, and
given the issue that's affecting
the territory right now, having
to do with perhaps
re-examination of our political
system, we deemed it important
to invite an expert on that, and
so...
I feel like I want to call you
Dr. Abramson because it's always
a very stimulating discussion
with regard to civics and the
like.
Tell us what is happening now,
and what are some concerns you
may have, having to do with the
whole issue of electoral
representation for the people of
the Virgin Islands?
>> Okay.

Thanks a lot, Attorney LaMont.
First of all, I wanted to lead
off by saying I wanted to
congratulate the St. Croix
Government Retirees Association
because they have done a
yeoman's job of bringing the
issue of initiative, basically,
which is we have a peoples-based
lawmaking process, to the
forefront and getting it --
This is the first time in the
history of the Virgin Islands
and of the Electoral Process
that it has gotten this far
along in terms of actually
getting onto a ballot.

So I think that's a major
historical achievement, and I
wanted to just put that one the
record because I think that's
critically important.

It proves that the initiative
process can work, that it's
achievable, and that it might
take a lot of leg work, but it
can be done, and I think it's
really important.

So I wanted to make sure that I
preface all my statements by
saying that.

Basically, what is proposed by
the St. Croix Government
Retirees initiative is a change
pursuant to the Organic Act of
1954, Section 12.

In response, they are basically
asking that a ballot initiative
be put on, and the ballot
initiative is based on the
actions.

Once you have the initiative
and you've gotten the necessary
amount of signatures, the
Attorney General of the Virgin
Islands, the Chief Legal Counsel
of the Virgin Islands
legislature, and the Supervisor
of Elections, they become a
titling board.

And their job is to look at the
initiative and put it in a
question format that will be on
the ballot.

>> Okay, can you repeat that
again, now?

Who?

It becomes a title board?

>> Titling board, yes.

>> Titling board. Okay.

>> Based on the initiative
Section 12 of the Organic Act,
which is the section for

initiative, the three individuals -- as I said, the Attorney General, the Chief Legal Counsel of the Legislature, and the Supervisor of Election convene and become a titling board.

And their job is to take the initiative as it was written by the proponents and formulate it into a succinct question that can be answered "Yes" or "No." Are you in favor, or are you against?

And, basically, they have put together the question, and the ballot question is -- Title 2, Chapter 6 of the Virgin Islands Code, entitled "Apportionment of the Legislature," is amended to read as follows:

There are five (5) legislative districts with nine (9) district Senators:

The District of St. Croix, East, shall have two (2) Senators.

The District of St. Croix, West, shall have two (2) Senators.

The District of St. Thomas, East, shall have two (2) Senators.

The District of St. Thomas, west, shall have two (2) Senators.

The District of St. John with one (1) Senator.

Vote upon by the qualified electors of the district.

And six (6) at-large senators.

Three (3) shall be residents of St. Croix and there shall be three (3) residents of St. Thomas.

Voted on by the qualified electors of the Virgin Islands as a whole.

Shall this proposal become law?"

Yes or No.

That is the question.

>> And that's essentially the proposal before the people of the Virgin Islands this March 30th, correct?

>> That is correct.

That is exactly what you will see on the ballot when you go to the poll.

It will be the only issues on the ballot.

And you are expected to vote on the matter as you see fit.

As an elector, which I am, the proposal in its present form does raise some questions for me that I think, in educating ourselves and educating each other, I think that we should maybe look at some of these questions because I think an issue of this magnitude is going to be far-reaching, and it's not as comprehensive as I'd like to see it be, but it could potentially be in place for a long time, and that might have some impact on us.

>> Can you tell us --

How many people have to vote in favor of this?

What are the voting requirements in order for this initiative to pass?

Basically -- and I'm gonna read specifically from the law so that we all can understand this properly.

This is, again, the Revised Organic Act.

This is Section 7.

"An initiative submitted to the voters shall take effect if the initiative is approved by a majority of persons voting and if a majority of the voters of the Virgin Islands vote on the initiative.

An initiative voted on may not be vetoed by the Governor when approved by the voters and may not be amended or repealed by the legislature during the 3-year period after its approval unless the legislature acts by a two-thirds majority.:

And I want to re-emphasize.

They have two thresholds to meet.

First threshold being that a majority of the persons voting and if a majority of the voters of the Virgin Islands.

So you have to go out, you have have a majority of the registered voters on the scrolls according to the election system, and of those people that actually show up to the polls, 50% plus one vote must vote in the affirmative on the matter for it to pass.

It is the law, it cannot be vetoed or repealed for a three-year period.

However, the legislature can

repeal the law with a 2/3 majority.

>> Okay, so, currently, I believe we have 22,978 registered voters on St. Croix and 25,299 registered voters between St. John and St. Thomas.

>> For a total of?

>> Well, so 50% of those have to show up to vote.

>> Correct.

>> And then the majority of them have to vote for it.

>> In the affirmative, correct.

>> Okay, all right.

>> So those are the thresholds that they kind of have to meet at this point.

And, again, I thought it was important for people to understand the initiative process because this --

Again, this has been --

As a former supervisor, I've presided over five attempts for this to take place, and this is the first time we've ever gotten this close, that we would have a peoples-based law made by the ballot.

>> Right, and you'd asked how many total that is.

That does come up to a total of 48,277 registered voters as of last notice.

So 24,135, essentially, have to show up.

>> Show up.

And of that number, of the 24,000, 50% plus one must vote in the affirmative.

Stakes are pretty high.

>> So you are saying that there are some questions that you have as far as the effect of this, the repercussions down the line if this measure is passed.

What, principally, comes to mind as far as your questions?

>> Well, my first few questions is, like, what is the goal?

What is that the proponents of the action would like to achieve?

In the election world, whenever you do one thing, you affect something else.

And, basically, I have been asking the question.

I've recently heard a jingle that said the goal is to get greater accountability, and I would tend to disagree with that

because I don't think this method will provide us a greater level of accountability.

It's my learned experience that the greatest level of accountability will come from direct, 100% geographical sub-districting of the territory or through a historical methodology we've used here before, had in place for 200 years, which is municipal government.

>> All right, well, this promises to be a very stimulating discussion. We're going to take a short break.

You're listening to "Ability Radio."

We'll be right back.

>> Now's the time for all good men to get together with one another.

We got to iron out our problems and iron out our quarrels and try to live as brothers.

And try to find peace within without stepping on one another.

Now's the time for all good men to get together with one another.

>> We're back.

This program is "Ability Radio." It's brought to by the Disability Rights Center of the Virgin Islands.

My name is Amelia Headley

LaMont, one of the co-hosts.

We're joined today by former Supervisor of Elections John Abramson and our able inquisitor, Staff Attorney Kippy Roberson.

Let me say this --

If you miss any part of this program, this program will be posted on our website, which is located on drcvi.org, and there will also be a transcript of this program that you're hearing today.

So let's resume with our line of questioning.

Again, Mr. Abramson, you had some concerns.

One was "what's the goal?"

>> what's the goal?

That's one of them, and if the goal is accountability --

As I've said, the methodologies that worked historically, we've had municipal government in the

Virgin Islands for about 200 years, and that's a sure set way of being accountable.

And then geographical sub-districting.

If you look at the Westminster system, basically, if you look any other Caribbean island, most of them have geographical sub-districting.

I kind of recently did some work with a group in Nevis, and Nevis has nine districts, or parishes, and they're much smaller than St. Croix.

Much smaller than the Virgin Islands, period.

And their representative must live where they represent.

And the proposal -- I don't know if you know this, but there is no residency requirement in the proposal for the individuals that are running for the district.

So that, again, raises another question for me.

And, again, my whole thing is, I have a lot of questions, and I'm hoping that prior to March 30th, which is the election day, that somebody will be able to answer a majority of them and help educate the public so that we can make an informed decision.

>> If I understood you correctly, Mr. Abramson, the initiative calls for two senators from West and East, both on St. Croix and St. Thomas.

>> Correct.

>> who decides where the line is drawn between East and West, so what the district will be for those respective senators.

>> I see you've got the same questions that I do.

[Laughter]

>> Those are the kind of questions I have.

Presently, the demarcation line for Frederiksted to Christiansted is the Armory Bethlehem Road that runs from Calhoun straight across to the airport road to the highway, and then across to the airport.

I have no idea who is responsible for that, what that district would look like.

Is it gonna be bigger?

Is it gonna be smaller?
Those are some of my very concerns because I think, if you look at --
I have looked at the 2010 census, and according to that document, the majority of our residents live mid-island between Peters Rest and Estate Grove Place.
About 33,000 people live in that block of area.
And if we only got 50,000 people, roughly, there in St. Croix, then that means the majority of people don't live in districts East or West, so I have a concern there.
>> Well, in the definition of the East and West is geographic by nature, but that gives no indication of where the population bases lie.
So it's not gonna be equitable to just draw a line halfway between East and West, is it?
>> That wouldn't serve because, still, the majority of people won't have any direct representation.
Again, if this is for accountability, so...
I'm trying to stay in line with what I've been told, and I just have, again, some questions that I haven't been able to stomach yet because I don't feel I've gotten the right answers.
>> Well, and according to that same census, the U.S. 2010 Census, there are 210 estates in St. Croix, there are 50 estates in St. John, and there are 72 estates in St. Thomas.
So that's how they broke them down, population per estate.
So would they have to go through and look at the populations for respective estates?
>> Of course!
Because we know anything dealing with -- and, again, these definitions, and I want to clear this up real quickly.
Reapportionment talks to number of seats.
It talks to seats and seats only.
It does not talk to the subject of redistricting, which is different than reapportionment.
We usually have, as a byproduct of reapportionment, the act of

redistricting.

I want to be clear there because, for some reason, we have these two very different topics intertwine into a single definition, and they are two different acts to take place. So if we are to reapportion, we are doing one thing, but if we are to redistrict now and change the geographical representation -- and they would have to look at estates because that is how the -- again, now we got to bring in the administrative arm of this activity -- the election system of the Virgin Islands, when they assign you to vote, it's done by estate, where you live.

So, again, as I said, when you affect one thing, you affect the others.

So has the election system been evolved?

I don't know.

I don't know whether they have been an active participant in providing information.

I know they've been involved in the initiative process, and I think that is their role, according to the law, and they will be involved in the election portion.

But, in between there, I don't know what role they really play.

>> well, and according to that same 2010 census, St. Croix has about 50,600 residents, St. Thomas has about 51,635 residents, and St. John had 4,170.

So just by doing the math for the four senators for St. Croix, that's about 12,650 residents per senatorial vote.

But with St. John having only 4,170 residents, that gives that voting population about three times the political influence of those of St. Thomas and St. Croix.

I mean, would you say that that would be an accurate -- if those numbers are correct...

>> I think that's a perfect representation.

As I said, the Supreme Court recently --

There are gonna be a number of federal and judicial issues that will need to be looked at with

this because the 14th amendment basically talks to equal protection, and voting rights are an equal protection act. You guys are the lawyers, so you would know better than me, but the bottom line is that recently, in 2018, the Supreme Court did say that the "One Man, One Vote" will be the law of the land.

They reaffirmed that after having numerous cases in Minnesota, Arizona -- a lot of different places that basically --

There were questions about their lines, their districting methodologies, and so these need to be looked at because I think they will be affected, and St. John will be a super island because there are -- again, the trigger for the "One Man, One Vote" in terms of number is usually 5,001 in terms of population.

And, again, I want to emphasize here --

I don't want to confuse people that we keep going back and forth and talking about population, but the reason is because the United States Constitution basically set the format that any reapportionment is going to be either census population-based, which is what they do.

The other methodology, just for my own training, is that it's either court-ordered -- the court has said to some election district, "You must do this." Or the legislature in and of themselves take it upon themselves to redrawn lines, and that's where the court usually ends up having to make decisions.

So those are the only real methods when you are changing the seating scenario of your state or territorial legislative body.

>> So if you get a disproportionate number of Senate votes for their underlying population, what would you expect, legal challenges to that?

>> Oh, without question. I believe immediately this would

be challenged.

I think that there would be nothing else you could do. You'd really have to go at this 100% because, as an elector in the St. Croix District, I would feel like I'm getting short-changed, like I'm losing something.

>> This is very interesting. I'm wondering what --

For example, you talked about redistricting, and there has to be some body that makes the determination as to where the lines are gonna be drawn. How would that occur? How would that potentially occur?

That seems like a pretty important task to have, you know, and the person or persons who are making that decision -- How does that happen?

>> well, I read the proposal to you in its entirety. That's the question that's gonna be before the public.

That's not part of the answer. It's not part of the proposal, it's not part of the answer. Potentially, I'm assuming, from previous discussions that I've had, the proponents have indicated -- well, the experts would be responsible for that. I would assume they meant the election system.

Legally, by Virgin Islands Code, the election system doesn't have the authority to do that.

The legislature does have the authority to do that.

The question I would ask -- Would they have the time, the effort?

So, to answer your question, it is still up in the air who is directly responsible if this does become a law and passes, who will be responsible for its implementation and execution.

And, again, I think we'll need a myriad of different people involved on the matter.

We'll need population experts, we will need demographic experts, we will need geographic experts, we'll need election experts.

So I think this gets to be an issue --

And, again, one of the issues

that no one has addressed, and I really must raise this big question because we always think about this, the elephant in the room that nobody ever wants to speak about is cost.

What is all of this going to cost?

Is it going to cost us to first put in the system in place? Because, nowadays, experts don't come through pretty cheap. So that's one issue.

And then what is the effect overall on the cost to the Virgin Islands, to the election system, to its development? Those issues have not been addressed.

>> well, and even ascertaining an accurate population number, I mean, the 2010 census -- since that time, we've had hovensa close and then reopen as Limetree.

We've had the hurricanes in 2017.

To your knowledge, does anybody have an accurate figure for what our populations are?

Because we haven't really had a census in almost 10 years.

>> 10 years.

I don't think we know how many people we really have.

For all we know, we might be actually put in a position where we should be losing senators, for all we know right now.

I mean, we really don't know.

I'm, again, concerned because in 2020, I think we are having a census.

Based on all I've heard in the news, we will be having a census in 2020.

That's gonna be asking some different questions.

We might be able to get a -- I don't want to say accurate reading on population, but we'll get a ballpark figure of what we're really dealing with.

>> Do you think it would be desirable to wait until that 2020 census to make those decisions as far as the districting?

Or should they be proceeded with and then modified, depending on what the census comes up?

>> I would 100% recommend waiting.

And I would go a step further.
I am not in favor of single proposals like this.
I like comprehensive structural development.
In other words, there's only one way for us to really answer all of the issues of structural government, structural legislature -- all of the things that we really need to look at -- electoral background, number of days you need to reside...
We need to head back to a Constitutional Convention, and I think that's my suggestion to the public at large because a lot of people think that, "Oh, we've tried five times, and we've failed."
We've never really failed at a Constitutional Convention.
I just want to put that on the record quickly because out of every Constitutional Convention we've ever had, from the first one in 1964, we've gleaned some issue of great self-governance. In '70, we got the elected governor.
We got the Virgin Islands Supreme Court out of the same issue.
We've made a lot of changes out of these coming together of the minds, and I think that we should reconvene a sixth Constitutional Convention -- or either continue the fifth, however they want to handle that from an administrative point of view.
But, like I said, five attempts is an infancy in the Constitutional world, and I think we should look at this holistically, and that would be the answer of fleshing out --
The last time, I think, on the Constitutional Convention, we had 21 people from all walks of life.
They took some time, and I think we should take some time again and not rush into anything that could potentially affect us for a very, very long time.
>> well, if this measure passes, is there any particular time frame you're aware of that it has to be implemented within?
I mean, does that have to occur

before the next election?
I didn't see that there was any time frame.
>> They have a time frame.
They said three years.
They got three years to get up and running and functional.
>> And if it doesn't happen in those three years, then what?
>> If it doesn't happen in three years, we're back where we started.
[Laughter]
>> All right, we're gonna take another break, and we'll be right back.
You're listening to "Ability Radio."
>> And try to find peace within without stepping on one another. Now's the time for all good men to get together with one another.
>> We're back.
You're listening to "Ability Radio."
I'm one of your co-hosts, Amelia Headley LaMont, Executive Director of the Disability Rights Center.
Our special guest today is John Abramson, former Supervisor of Elections for the U.S. Virgin Islands.
I'm also joined this morning by our Staff Attorney, Kippy Roberson.
Again, if you've missed any portion of this show, it will be posted on our website, drcvi.org, along with a transcript of today's program.
I'm gonna ask you a question that I know I've asked you before, Mr. Abramson, and I frankly think it's something that still sits in people's minds, and I think that's partly why people are so, you know, active in trying to make our legislative system more accountable.
You may recall, and we had this discussion earlier, that there was a vote put out -- I guess it was a referendum -- you can correct me if my language isn't precise -- where we voted for a reduction in the size of the legislature.
Now, in the public mind, we thought we won, that we said, let's reduce the number from 15

to whatever the number was.

>> Nine.

>> Nine, okay.

Can you give us a little background as to why that didn't happen?

>> Well, basically, the proposal, which was sponsored by former Senator Adlah Donastorg, he put together a proposal, and his proposal truly was a referendum -- and I want to make it clear again, words make a big thing of the election world.

A referendum is a legislatively driven question to the voting public on a matter, and the initiative is the flipside of that because it's the people-driven side.

Basically, his proposal was to petition the Congress of the United States for the authority to reduce the size of the legislature.

However, prior to the voting day, which was November 5, 1998, the Congress of the United States, on October 28, 1998, told the legislature of the Virgin Islands, "You have the authority to reduce the size, increase it, to do whatever you like," and that was done.

However, the people went on to vote on the matter, and a majority of people voted in what I would like to call that opinion poll to make it to reduce them to nine members.

Now, the reason nothing has happened, and before the previous break, you asked the question "what will happen if this doesn't go anywhere?"

No senator --

Okay, the people voted in the affirmative.

Whether it was the right thing or not, they did express a will or intent -- that's the word I want to use -- that they wanted the reduction of the Senate to take place.

But it wasn't binding.

The opinion poll was binding upon no one.

The senators didn't pick it up.

We voted for --

We've had referendums for casino hotel development, which is to make casino gambling legal.

We have a casino because then,

a former senator picked it up and shepherded it through the legislature.

So somebody made an action happen.

Recently, we just voted on medical marijuana, and we had an opinion poll on that previously, and the people did vote in favor of it, and now it is actually the law of the Virgin Islands. So if somebody doesn't pick it up or if it's not binding upon somebody in its instructions who should do what, it just goes nowhere.

>> Now, we discussed that there are 48,277 registered voters at last count in the Virgin Islands.

Do you recall what percentage voter turnout we had for the general election last November?

>> Last November's general election, I think it was between 62% and 64%, in the last general election.

>> Okay.

>> And, again, that's the gubernatorial race.

That's usually where we have -- Traditionally, in the Virgin Islands, we really do have, generally, as compared to other places, a pretty high turnout, but in the non-gubernatorial races, that number falls about 20%.

>> So if we just have a single issue on the ballot, like this initiative, is that gonna cause more or fewer voters, in your experience, to come out to vote?

>> Again, I think --

Our voters are kind of funny, to say the least.

I think that most of the time, people will be like, "why would I waste my time and just go and vote on that?"

Traditionally, when you have these kinds of issues, you try to get them on a ballot that has people running for an office on it because the turnout is usually much greater.

It's my anticipation that this turnout will be relatively low. Again, I look at things like the primary election, which is, again, the responsibility of the election system.

And, traditionally, primary

election is between 12% and 20% turnout.

Again, it's only party members, but we got to keep in mind that one party in the Virgin Islands has 40,000 members, the Democrats, so the numbers are pretty comparable in terms of looking at voting populations.

>> Well, since is the first initiative that's come up for a vote, it'd be difficult to predict how it might be viewed by the public or what kind of enthusiasm they would bring.

>> And, again, I do that from different variables.

If I'm standing in a bank line, and somebody is speaking about the matter, then I think there's interest there.

If I'm in the supermarket, and there's interest there...

I've been on, like, 10 radio shows, and I haven't --

Between the host and myself and some other guests, we've had some discussions, but it's been the general feeling among most people that I've spoken to that they haven't -- they don't feel the issue right now, and that's generally been the sense that I'm getting, however, again, I am interested in seeing what the turnout will be, again, because this a historical event for me. It's historical in that it is the first time that this law that has been in place for over 30 years, the first time that it's actually being put directly to the voter, and being the former Supervisor, I think that's a big issue for me.

>> Now, the election for this is March 30th?

>> Election is March 30th.

I think they have been going under the early voting, it's already started on the matter.

I think it's still going on.

I'm not too particularly sure.

I think they need to stop two weeks prior to the event.

And, again, I'm really looking forward to seeing what's happening on the 30th.

I will be out of the territory, but I'm really interested in seeing what's going to take place.

>> As we get closer to the

voting day, do you anticipate a media blitz or hearing more about this issue as it comes closer to the time to make the decision?

>> To be quite frank with you, I don't because, again, I think the interest has been waning. I think people are going to speak about it a little bit, but I don't think that the majority of people in the territory -- It's not what we call a bread-and-butter issue, that if we do this -- when we elect senators and governors, it affects our lives immediately. I don't think people see this as an immediate effect on their life.

>> Well, and it seems in the most recent election, there was a lot of use made of social media.

There was a tremendous amount of what would be relatively quiet. You aren't seeing it in headlines, you aren't hearing it necessarily on the radio. Do you think that's --

>> You're not seeing it on social media, either. You can ask her, she can tell us.

>> Okay.

>> But I haven't seen it. I'm not really a big social media user, but I look on every now and then to see what's going on, and I'm not seeing a whole lot there, either.

I mean, it's not like before where you were having ads pop up at you and stuff like that.

And most people -- I mean, the majority of people in the world now use some form of social media.

So it would behoove me, if you're trying to convince people to do something, that that medium would be one of the most effective to use.

So, again, I don't think it's one that we really need to worry too much about.

Again, I just have concerns, and I want to use an analogy here because this is the way I've been seeing this.

I understand that sometimes when you make things like

constitutions, you sometimes keep them general. But laws, I think, need to be as specific as possible. Like I said, you guys are lawyers. So you know ambiguous law can make a lot of problems for people. So I kind of look at this as like me going into the supermarket to buy something, and I see a cardboard box, and it has no instructions, no labeling, and I'm being asked to purchase it. But I don't know what's in the box. So, as cautious a person I am, I would, more likely, not purchase the box and just leave it there because not knowing is an important part of self-preservation. And so if I don't know, I would pretend to leave it alone.

>> That's a very wise thing to do.

[Laughter]

Again, the thought, I'm sure, behind this particular matter that we are asked to vote on, it's based upon a feeling or perception that our elected officials are not as, I'd say, engaged as we'd like, or not as responsive?

So, I mean, where does that leave us?

I mean, I got the sense that, okay, GERS, to their credit, moved this to where we are right now.

>> To their credit, to their credit.

>> And I don't know if that may suggest that this may be based upon a census of persons who are GERS recipients or eligible.

>> I want to know why nobody asked me.

I'm not a member of the club...

>> Okay.

>> But I'm a GERS recipient, so I think that --

>> Okay.

>> That's the important issue. So, again, I think the whole thing --

My concerns are in basic issues. Like I said, where's the empirical data to support this kind of change, if the data has

been done, and if it was, what is it?

Can we see some of that?

And I know the time is getting closer.

Today --

It's not too far from the 30th. It's a matter of two weeks from now.

So, again, those questions just lingering out there without any answers leaves me a little bewildered as to whether or not it is in our best interest to take this up right now.

The other part of it is something we spoke about earlier.

I just can't see what's the rush.

What's the impending action that will happen if we don't do it right now?

Because if we are looking at a census next year that the feds are gonna take care of and do the basic groundwork for us, I can't see why we couldn't just hold on a little bit and look at it maybe after we take the census and have some information that we can justify and support certain actions.

>> One of the concerns I also have is --

Okay, we're still keeping 15 representatives, correct?

>> Correct.

>> How does the At-Large Representative interact with the District Representative?

Does the At-Large Representative have more than one vote versus the District Representative?

Are we still gonna retain what we say a unicameral, a one-house legislature, or is it gonna be a two-house, bicameral, more than one body?

You know, I mean, like a House of Representatives versus a Senate.

Does this proposal even address that?

>> The proposal does not address it.

It changes nothing in our structural form of the legislature.

We will have a single, unicameral House of Representatives that are still required to meet on the island

of St. Thomas in the Chamber.
Our present high-bred system,
where we have 7, 7, and 1.
Our senators presently are
voted, in the respective
district, by district voters.
However, they also function as
Virgin Islands senators on
Virgin Islands issues.
In the new proposal, the
district senators will still
vote on district issues, and
they will still vote on
territorial issues.
The At-Large senators, who
will be elected by the people of
the Virgin Islands, will vote on
district issues and at-large
issues.
We will still have 15 members.
We will not have a bicameral
structure where we have a House
and a Senate, or an Upper House
and a Lower House.
I don't want to give them any
specific name, but an Upper
House and a Lower House.
We will have exactly the same
structure we have right now.
One of the issues, again, that I
look at is cost.
Is this gonna cost us more, or
is this gonna cost us less?
Do we have to make more space
now?
Do we have fly people more back
and forth now?
Because we have six At-Large
senators.
Then I have to be involved in
everything that takes place in
three places, every issue of
three places.
So, traditionally, the At-Large
senator we have now was the only
person charged with that
responsibility.
So do we have to triplicate our
staff of six people in three
islands?
Okay, those are all issues.
My other issues, at least for
the candidates, are their
individual costs.
If I want to run, we have to
pay.
You have to run a campaign.
>> And campaigns aren't cheap.
You're listen to "Ability
Radio."
we're gonna take a brief break,
and we'll be right back.
>> And try to live as brothers.

And try to find peace within
Now's the time for all good men
to get together with one
another.
>> We're back.
This is "Ability Radio."
I am your co-host, Amelia
Headley LaMont.
This program is brought to you
by the Disability Rights Center
of the Virgin Islands.
One of our grants deals with
voter education, and today, we
thought we would bring to the
attention of our listening
audience the importance of just
being informed.
What we want to encourage is an
informed electorate.
We are not in any way advocating
for one position over the other.
I should also state that if
there is a contrary opinion from
what you hear from this
broadcast today, please give us
a call at 772-1200, and we will
happily schedule an interview
with the opposing viewpoint.
But our whole goal today is to
really take on a more academic
approach consistent with our
work having to do with informing
our community as to issues so
that we can vote intelligently.
We are joined today by the
former Supervisor of Election,
John Abramson, and Attorney
Kippy Roberson from the St.
Croix Disability Rights Office.
Kippy, did you have a question?
>> Well, I was --
It makes me curious because, I
mean, the stated goal for the
initiative is to have more
accessibility and accountability
by our senators, and, I mean,
we have roughly 106,000
population and 15 senators.
Is it your perception or your
experience that the senators
have been inaccessible or
unresponsive to their
constituents?
>> Quite the contrary to me.
I believe that one of the
biggest things -- and I tell
this to my friends all the time,
especially in the United States,
I could go and drive up to the
gas station and see my state
representative, which is
basically our senators or our
state representative,

territorial representative and have a full-blown discussion. I can do it in the supermarket, I can do it after church. I could even catch them in the bar.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> I mean, pretty much anywhere. I used to live in New Hampshire, and New Hampshire has a pretty large state legislation.

They have -- They call themselves assembly people. They meet from July to September and they have people from every walk of life, but in my time living there, I have never met one person that could say to me -- I used to live in Newark, they actually meet in Concord -- that said they actually saw a state representative.

Never.

>> Goodness. Wow.

>> And, to me, that's what I'm saying.

I think our senators are extremely accessible.

They take part in parades.

I mean, you could go pretty much anywhere and run into them and have them at your avail.

And I did want to piggyback on something you said.

I wanted to piggyback on the education process.

Virgin Islands electors are extremely savvy electors.

They're brilliant.

They are smart, they are engaged.

For most Virgin Islanders, when we are campaign mode, is a contact sport.

They are in it.

It's like football.

They're in it morning, noon, and night.

They talk politics at the table.

Even at the church, growing issues...

Everybody talks politics.

So that's one of my concerns.

Again, I haven't seen that engagement that I'm

traditionally used to.

You all know as well as I do.

We just came through an election.

Every single day, you would hear somebody saying, "well, what do you think about so-and-so and so-and-so?"

whether it was people running
for governor or the people
running for Senate?
If it's the At-Large...
"Why is she running?"
They would be engaged because
they do ask the questions.
And, again, I'm not getting that
feeling, but I wanted to make
sure that we understand, our
electorates are always fully
engaged when it comes to
elections.
>> And that's quite encouraging,
you know, when you hear about
situations where people aren't
able to be an engaged.
>> Right.
>> Or outwardly disenfranchised.
That is an encouraging thing
that we should be quite proud
of.
You had some other concerns
about this proposal.
What were they?
I mean, we can talk about the
history of the forming of the
United States, and, certainly,
the territory's relationship to
the Continental U.S. is
certainly an issue.
>> That continues...
>> And that would be another
show.
>> That continues to be so,
right?
>> What are some other concerns
or questions, I think, is a
better way to phrase it, that we
had talked about earlier?
>> Well, one of the big ones --
And, again, I keep going back to
it.
I want to make sure I use the
right words.
The whole redistricting concept,
I think that is critically
important to me because if
you're going to say to me that I
will get more accountability
than I'm expecting, I should be
able to go and say, "Senator
LaMont, I want that road fixed."
>> Mm-hmm.
>> I mean, right now, I can tell
all the senators I can.
I have been telling all the
senators I can, but when you
have to live and traverse the
same areas that I do, life is a
whole lot different.
Recently, in the past
administration, one of the

people working as Public Works Commissioner lived in the La Grange area, and the roads to his house was perfectly smooth and beautiful.

[Laughter]

They get things done when you're in your district, and, again, that's why it's important to me because I am a strong municipal government advocate.

That is my forte.

I've been involved with researching, I've been involved with a number of other local Virgin Islanders since 1980 on the municipal issues.

More specifically, Mr. Philip Gerard and Mr. Merwin here at Frederiksted and Mr. George Franklin -- some of the older individuals that actually lived through some municipal government.

I think that that's the greatest form.

We call it -- In the United States, they call it county or local government, and I think that is the way that we would get our best representation, and we can look at the issues of cost, and, again, I think it would be easy because some of the services that we triplicate now -- for example, fire service.

When I was growing up, we had a volunteer fire service.

We have volunteer auxiliary police officers.

It was a community.

You did things for your community, and I think that those ideas work.

>> So what's the principle distinctions between what we have as a senate and a municipal government?

>> Well, again, we would either go to --

We have to pick a structure, whether we wanted to have a city council that meets part-time, and they have a City Manager that, actually, his full-time job is to take care of the city. Or we could have a mayor, which we could have a mayoral system. We have a mayor, and he does certain things.

And, again, we could have assembly people.

Again, these people would work part time because -- I might serve if it wasn't a full-time job. I mean, I might consider serving. I serve on several boards. I'm at the Frederiksted Health Center. We could change the structure a little bit. For example, St. Croix -- let's say they have a municipal council in Christiansted, and we have one in Frederiksted. We can come together, maybe, every quarter, as they traditionally did, and talk about issues for the island of St. Croix, and that's as far as we would go, and that's it. That would be our concern. We wouldn't be concerned with what's happening in St. Thomas. We would be concerned for things like, "well, how come the crime rate is higher here in St. Croix?" And do things to modify that in our respective districts, and I think that kind of structuring would work very, very well. Like I said, we've had it for 200 years previously.

>> So would your suggestion be there'd be a separate municipal government for St. Croix and St. Thomas?

>> Oh, quite definitely.

>> So they would each be, essentially, running themselves like a municipality would.

>> Exactly.

And I think that gives power to the people because then we would have -- like I said... I always use New Hampshire because New Hampshire is a small state, and the state motto is "Live free or die!"

[Laughter]

And they have the least -- Two states.

I went to school in both Delaware and New Hampshire. The two states that have the least government intervention in their lives. But they have great services through their tax dollar. They get great service because, again, they treat you like a community, as we have

traditionally done.
So the money really gets down,
your tax dollar gets down to the
people, as close to them as
possible.
I like that.
I think that works.
And, again, it's just --
I think a lot of people, we are
not exposing people to all of
the various systems of
representation that there are
out there.
There are so many of them.
I mean, hundreds of systems of
representation that you can pick
on, and I'll just name a few.
You have a proportional system,
you have a socioeconomic system.
You have a mixed system, you
have majoritarian systems.
You have all kinds of different
systems that you can make --
Or you can make a system unto
yourself.
So there's all these
methodologies out there to be
used.
We just got to find which one
works best for us.
>> And we're gonna continue in
that vein because I think you've
prompted a number of questions.
We're gonna take a short break,
and we'll be right back.
You're listening to "Ability
Radio."
>> Try to live as brothers.
And try to find peace within
Now's the time for all good men
to get together with one
another.
>> We're back, and we only have
a few minutes left to the show.
Mr. Abramson, you talked about
the positive aspects of a
municipally run government.
I guess my question would be,
then, and I can certainly
understand that --
How would the Virgin Islands as
an entity, then, conduct itself,
if we had a municipal structure?
I guess that's not something you
could answer, that this will be
it, but an idea because you just
ticked off a few things which,
again, would be another program.
How would that work?
>> Simply the same as I said.
We could have, potentially --
Let's say we had a structure of
two municipalities --

Christiansted and Frederiksted and St. Croix. They get together, become the Municipal Council of St. Croix. They do the same thing at St. Thomas, and then every so often -- again, every quarter, every half-year -- the two councils come together and make Virgin Islands decisions. And, again, that's a very rudimentary structure, but it gives the idea, and I'll use the election system. Prior to the structure the board has now, we had two district boards -- the St. Thomas, St. John District Board, which was comprised of seven members of St. Thomas, St. John. Two of them had to be from the island of St. Croix, five from the island of St. Thomas. St. Croix had seven members for a 14-member board. They would have to meet quarterly in order to make unified territorial decisions under the title of the joint Boards of Elections. Same structure. That's how they took care of all the territorial matters. Hopefully we would look at matters like uniformity and how you did things uniformly so that you wouldn't it one way in St. Thomas and another way in St. Croix. But that structure of coming together in limited times kind of works, and I think that's a good one to look at. >> well, this has been a very illuminating hour, and I'd like to, first of all, ask you if you have any parting thoughts that you'd like to leave. >> well, I just wanted to say -- Again, I want to congratulate the Retirees Group, and I keep saying that, and people might think I'm being facetious, but I'm really -- I not. I just think it's a milestone in the political development of the Virgin Islands where we are finally getting the electorate to a point where they want to express their concerns through the process of the ballot. You know, you look at states like California.

You know, I saw their ballot one time.

They had like 129 initiatives on the ballot.

I mean, that might sound crazy to people, but in the election world, we call that pure democracy.

Pure democracy.

It's not through any representative form of anything.

It's pure democracy.

And I would encourage people, whether this wins, loses, or draw that they don't take this as saying that people are really interested but that they get out there and they do the same thing, if they feel passionate about an issue that they want the public to consider.

>> Well, thank you.

>> I do want to thank you for having me, as well.

>> [Laughing] Okay!

This has been "The Ability Radio Hour."

We are excited that you were able to share this information with us, and I'd like to thank you, Mr. Abramson, for sharing your wisdom with us.

>> You're very welcome.

>> This has been very illuminating.

And I'd also like to thank my co-worker Kippy Roberson.

Thank you for your questions and your research.

>> My pleasure.

Thank you for having me.

>> We'll talk to you next week.

Thank you so much for listening to "Ability Radio."

>> Now's the time for all good men to get together with one another.

We got to iron out our problems and iron out our quarrels and try to live as brothers.

And try to find peace within