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Contentious debate on island-based governments results in consensus on how to establish them

By MEGAN POINSKI

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ST. THOMAS - In a long and sometimes tedious meeting on Tuesday, Constitutional Convention delegates cobbled together language that would allow for the establishment of local governments.

The convention never established a quorum on Tuesday, so no votes were taken. However, after hours of discussions, members who were at the meeting reached a general consensus on language to be voted on later.

Tuesday's discussion did have periods broken by shouting - mostly delegates arguing with one another about whose turn it was to speak - but in total it was much more controlled than the angry free-for-all at last week's session.

The draft, presented by local government committee vice chairman Craig Barshinger, provided that the Senate would create political subdivisions for each major island - one for St. Thomas, one for St. John and one for St. Croix.

That means that each island would be able to put together its own local government.

The outline of the way a local government is organized - things like the number of council members, whether the island would elect a mayor or appoint a manager, and what municipal government would be responsible for providing - is often called a charter.

The constitutional draft that Barshinger presented initially incorporated that word.

Delegate Claire Roker said that many people in the territory would get stuck at the word "charter" because they don't know what it means. The idea behind the word, however, is something that more people would want to support.

"Why don't we say, 'Local government is A B C D E?' Why do we have to use the word charter?" Roker asked.

"To me, as a layperson, we are making certain things too complicated for the public to buy into. This is not about us."

The draft was reworded, replacing the word "charter" with "framework for self government."

People living in each subdivision would write those frameworks. The draft directs the Senate to pass laws establishing elected commissions of people to write the frameworks within two years of the constitution's ratification.

Some delegates supported making the language more specific so they could lay out more about what the commissions would be responsible for, or listing some things that local government would handle.

Attorney Lloyd Jordan, legal counsel to the convention, discouraged too much specificity in the document.

If delegates are too specific then government is not free to grow by itself, and important things will be left out, he said.

Delegate Charles Turnbull decried attempts to add new and specific clauses, asking delegates to go back to the document completed in 1981 by the Fourth Constitutional Convention.

"My problem with many things in this constitution is we were told in the beginning to update and revise the Fourth," said Turnbull, a delegate to the Fourth Constitutional Convention and a former governor. "If we had done that, we would be finished by now, you know. We have written a new Bible."

Barshinger, a former senator, stressed that delegates should be able to trust the Senate. He did support adding an effective date for the Senate to pass a law to schedule the election for the local government framework developers.

The convention has discussed converting the Senate to a part-time operation once there is established local government, and senators might be loath to pass a law that would end their full-time employment, Barshinger said.

Delegates also heard a presentation on Tuesday from the drafting committee dealing with health, public safety and homeland security.

The session continues today at Marriott's Frenchman's Reef and Morningstar Beach Resort.

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