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Convention recasts Legislature

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ST. THOMAS - The Constitutional Convention's Legislative Branch Committee finished its work on the article dealing with the first branch of government on Wednesday night.

Committee members approved the article without objection at the conclusion of an hour and a half of discussion on the way the Senate should be composed. Delegates conducted their meeting using the Board of Education's teleconferencing facilities, with some members on St. Thomas and others on St. Croix.

The committee already had approved most of the portions of the draft. The only one left for consideration was deciding the makeup of the Senate. On Wednesday night, delegates unanimously approved a 15-member legislature with the following composition:

- St. Thomas and St. Croix would each be divided into three legislative districts. Voters in each district would elect two senators.
- Territorywide, voters would select one at-large senator from St. Thomas and one at-large senator from St. Croix.
- St. John would be its own legislative district, and voters living there would elect one St. John senator.

The question of the St. John senator dominated discussion during the meeting. St. John delegate Elsie Thomas-Trotman and St. Thomas delegate Wilma Marsh Monsanto, who originally is from St. John, had several questions about the way that the new system would work for the residents of that island. Committee chairman Eugene Petersen explained that the plan came from public hearings.

"I think that the committee has listened to St. Johnians in discussions, and I think it is clear that they want their own representative to point to, and they want their own municipal government," Petersen said. "It came from a cross section of the people."

When breaking down the territory's population, Petersen said that the proposed Senate setup gives an advantage to the people of St. John. If representatives were allocated evenly based solely on population, St. John only has about half the number of people needed to have its own senator.

However, Petersen said that because of the territory's geographic setup, the committee decided that there should be a senator dedicated to St. John. St. John residents also get the chance to vote on the two at-large senators, despite the fact that they live on the smallest island, Petersen said.

Monsanto, who is not a member of the committee, was not sure if this would be the best way to give St. John residents the representation they desire in the Senate.

"Right now, we have more visiting residents than born St. Johnians," Monsanto said. "I wonder if this will be a problem. We've had this for some time. We have an outside force coming in. We don't have as many indigenous St. Johnians."

Delegate Clement Magras responded candidly.

"Well, it's up to whoever is registered to vote," he said.

Delegates debated whether they should further divide St. Thomas and St. Croix into six districts, with each district electing a single senator. When that discussion stalemated, delegate Douglas Brady proposed numbering the seats in each district and requiring candidates to run for specific seats.

"I would rather see people vote for one senator instead of this silly free for all with everyone running for nothing," Brady said.

Delegates also made the following changes to the draft:

- Setting the first session of each legislature for the second Monday of the year after the election. It initially said the first Monday after the first Tuesday of the year, but that was changed so it will not conflict with gubernatorial inaugurations.
- Giving the legislature until the end of its next full session to override a gubernatorial veto. The language initially said that vetoed legislation must be overridden within 30 days, but Sen. Louis Hill suggested that the language be changed because there might not be another session within 30 days.

The draft article will be presented to the full convention at its session next week.