



Full Story

Delegates' day spent waiting, eating, squabbling

By MEGAN POINSKI

Wednesday, January 28th 2009

ST. THOMAS - At Tuesday's Constitutional Convention session, delegates waited 10 hours for a quorum, ate three meals on the government's dime, and spent about 30 minutes in session arguing about the body's quorum rules.

About 8 p.m., the quorum was broken and the meeting dissolved into chaos.

Several delegates started shouting at each other, both in the conference room where they met and in the hallways of Marriott's Frenchman's Reef and Morningstar Beach Resort. Some delegates stayed in their seats and shared feelings of frustration, hurt and disgust. The meeting abruptly ended without formal adjournment as delegates started getting in the buffet line for dinner.

Tuesday was the first part of a two-day session of the convention at Frenchman's Reef. Treasurer Mario Francis estimated the cost of the two-day session - including airfare for St. Croix delegates, hotel rooms and meals - at \$10,000.

As he spoke up for the last time at Tuesday night's meeting, Convention president Gerard Luz James II, who traveled from St. Croix for the session, asked all delegates to be ready to begin work for the second day of the session at 8:15 a.m. today.

"I just hope that tomorrow will be a better day," James said. "All of us are important. For all of us, our time is very special. For us to travel to St. Thomas, to leave our homes, families and jobs to come to St. Thomas and waste the day is the utmost height of ridiculousness. It is more than disrespectful."

Delegates' frustration and anger simmered all day. According to the territorial law establishing the convention, no session of the convention can take place without a quorum of 21 of the 30 delegates.

Tuesday's was supposed to begin at 9 a.m. Five of the 30 delegates had signed in to be ready for business by then. The earliest delegates, according to the sign-in sheet, were James, Douglas Brady, Emanuel, Thomas Moore, and Elsie Thomas-Trotman.

Half of the delegates had signed in to be ready for business by 10 a.m. By that time, consultants, news reporters, attorneys, court reporters and members of the public had assembled in the conference room, awaiting the beginning of the session. The delegates who were ready for business then included Mario Francis, Lois Hassel Habtes, Wilma Marsh Monsanto, Mary Moorhead, Kendall Petersen, Claire Roker, Robert Schuster, Michael Thurland, Alecia Wells and Lisa Williams.

But because there were not 21 delegates together, the convention delegates continued to wait. The breakfast items set out for them disappeared, and hotel staff came to clear the buffet table.

The clock kept ticking and morning turned to afternoon. By the time lunch was served at 1:30 p.m., five more delegates had signed in. They included Craig Barshinger, Stedmann Hodge Jr., Clement Magras, Richard Schrader Jr. and Arturo Watlington Jr.

As they ate lunch, delegates grumbled about the wasted day. James said that convention secretary Moorhead had checked with all 30 delegates to see if they would be able to attend the two-day session. Twenty-five of them committed to attending, James said.

Yet only 20 were in the room at one time throughout the early part of Tuesday. Delegate Adelbert Bryan was at the hotel throughout the day on Tuesday, but did not come into the meeting room in order to make a quorum.

Bryan, who spent much of his day walking into and out of the conference room, said that a quorum does not depend on him.

"I can't keep them from having a quorum," Bryan said. "I am one person, and if you take one from 30, there's 29."

Bryan continued, saying that he had traveled from St. Croix, and all St. Thomas delegates should be in attendance anyway because the meeting is in their district. He said that some of the delegates to the convention spoke about expelling him, so he does not want to be the deciding factor in making quorum.

About 2 p.m., delegates decided to move forward with informal discussions of the three articles they planned to vote on: the executive branch, legislative branch, and Virgin Islands citizenship.

At that time, plans also were made to try and begin the session at 6 p.m., and discussions went for more than two hours without a record being kept, but open to the public.

At some point during the informal afternoon discussion, Bryan signed in with the time he had arrived: 9:45 a.m.

Four delegates were excused from Tuesday's meeting, having told Moorhead in advance

that they would not attend. Those delegates included Douglas Capdeville, Myron Jackson, Lawrence Sewer and Charles Turnbull.

Delegates Rena Brodhurst, Arnold Golden, Violet Anne Golden and Eugene Petersen did not give an explanation for not attending.

Delegate Frank Jackson joined the group about 6 p.m., but it took another hour for the delegates who had attended the day's session to all be in the conference room at the same time.

As soon as there were 21 delegates in the room - at 7:04 p.m. - James called the convention to order.

The first order of business before delegates was a motion amending the convention rules so they could eliminate quorum calls during a session once a quorum is established. During sessions, some delegates ask for a quorum call as soon as there are fewer than 21 delegates in the room. As a result, business often screeches to a halt.

Watlington objected to the motion.

"If the legislation says we establish a quorum at 21, I don't know how we can change that. The rules don't speak to that."

James responded that the change would just allow the convention to continue its deliberations. But Bryan was not convinced either.

"You have to have a quorum all the time to approve business," he said.

Bryan and a few other delegates stepped out of the conference room - breaking the quorum - as delegates began grumbling about the issue. Thurland made a motion to force an immediate vote on the issue - then realized that there were not enough delegates present to take action.

He shouted in anger, then left the conference room and began yelling at other delegates in the hall.

After that, the floodgates burst open.

"I gone! This is wasting government money and time," Hodge said as he stormed out.

Thurland started yelling at Watlington, who has not attended most committee meetings or sessions.

"I don't come because you don't know what you're doing," Watlington shouted back.

Kendall Petersen, noticing news reporters taking notes, shouted over the voices.

"They will all read this in the news tomorrow," he said.

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