



Full Story

Delegates expected to reflect diversity of V.I. people

By MEGAN POINSKI

Thursday, May 10th 2007

We the people.

The Constitution of the United States and each Virgin Islands constitutional draft that begins with a preamble begins with these three words, describing those who had input in the document's drafting and those supporting its ratification.

But who are "we the people?"

The law enacting the Fifth Constitutional Convention defines the first group of "we the people" - those who will be tasked with writing the document - as 30 delegates. Thirteen will be elected by voters on St. Thomas and St. John, 13 will be elected by St. Croix voters, and four will be elected at large, with two from the St. Thomas-St. John district and two from St. Croix.

Beyond that, who should they be? Politicians? Scholars? Lawyers? Doctors? Native born? Transplants who call the territory home? Business owners? Government employees? Educators? Housewives? Retired? Students? Rich? Poor?

All of the above, said many of the territory's close observers of governance.

"This process requires all different people of different perspectives coming together," said V.I. Delegate to Congress Donna Christensen.

The territory's voters will select the fifth group of drafters for a Virgin Islands Constitution at a nonpartisan special election on June 12. As of midafternoon Wednesday, V.I. Elections supervisor John Abramson Jr. said 156 petitions to run had been picked up territorywide. In the St. Thomas and St. John district, 55 petitions for district delegate have been picked up, and 10 have been picked up for at-large delegates. On St. Croix, 73 petitions for district delegate have been picked up, and 18 petitions have been picked up to run at large.

There is still time for more potential delegates to throw their hats into the ring. Abramson said that petitions can be still be picked up and they can be turned back in until 5 p.m. on Wednesday.

Malik Sekou, chairman of the University of the Virgin Island's social sciences division, said

delegates should mirror the people living in the territory.

"Every ethnic group, every social and economic class," Sekou said. "We are striving for a more perfect union, and we should have a document that reflects the community's interest."

Paul Leary, professor emeritus at UVI, said that it is vital for people who can represent the viewpoints of different groups in the territory to write the constitution.

"Unless we get something that's representative of the community, it's not going to sell," Leary said.

New Jersey attorney Neal Solomon, who was legal counsel to three constitutional conventions in U.S. territories, including the Third Constitutional Convention in the Virgin Islands, agreed with Leary.

"You need all kinds," said Solomon. "You need people who are interested in government, interested in the culture of the place, and willing to take the time to do the necessary public service."

G. Alan Tarr, director of Rutgers University's Center for State Constitutional Studies, said that anyone who meets the qualifications to be a delegate and knows and cares about the territory's system of governance should consider running.

"There is no job description exactly, except that you need to be a person who is committed to the good of society," Tarr said.

By the nature of a constitutional convention, Tarr said, most delegates are not politicians in the usual sense. Delegates are elected only once, so they do not have to satisfy particular interest groups in order to win re-election. As a nonpartisan undertaking, he said, drafting the constitution is less likely to be a war between interests of different political parties.

"Most of them, even if delegates are elected on a party ballot, are representing a common purpose," Tarr said.

Constitutional conventions have been a training ground or chance to share vast expertise for five governors, one V.I. Delegate to Congress, two judges and many senators and members of elected boards.

Sen. Shawn-Michael Malone, who brought the legislation to schedule the convention forward in 2004, said that delegates should include people like lawyers and historians. Regular citizens, he said, should round out the delegates.

While Malone is interested in the process of drafting a constitution for the territory, he said he is not interested in becoming one of the drafters himself. The law putting the convention in place has no restrictions on who can become a delegate. Senators, members of the boards of elections and education, and even the governor and lieutenant governor are allowed to be

delegates.

"I believe that senators shouldn't," Malone said. "We are doing another job. The people should be involved, not us. We are already involved."

Politicians have a long history of involvement in Virgin Islands constitutional conventions. The enacting legislation for the first two conventions included all sitting senators as drafters. Other elected officials have juggled two positions, but it was not always beneficial. According to attendance records from the Third Constitutional Convention in 1977 and 1978, government officials missed the most plenary sessions. Most of them missed at least a third of the meetings, The Daily News reported.

Gov. Juan Luis - who was lieutenant governor at the time of his election to the convention - and Sen. Roger Hill had the highest absentee rate, with each of them missing nine of 12 sessions.

Senate President Elmo Roebuck missed eight of 12 sessions.

Sen. Sidney Lee, Sen. Lloyd Williams and Sen. John Maduro all missed five sessions.

As for other government officials' attendance, assistant executive secretary to the Legislature James O'Neal Henderson missed five sessions. Assistant to the Governor Adelbert Anduze also missed five. Luis aide Louis Boschulte missed four sessions.

Christensen said that it is important for the territory's different perspectives to be represented among convention delegates.

"These people may not necessarily see themselves as politicians, but we need to have a broad participation of the community for people who run as delegates," she said. "It is important to understand that people don't have to have a Ph.D. or degree in political science to take part in this process."

Two-term governor and delegate to all four previous constitutional conventions Charles Turnbull said that both luminaries of Virgin Islands history and members of the public were represented in the previous constitutional conventions. The most important qualification, he said, is the ability to work with others.

Kevin Williams, the public policy chairman for Generation NOW, agreed with Turnbull.

"The most important people to have are consensus builders," Williams said. "I don't think individuals who come with predestined opinions will necessarily be good delegates. We need people who will get people together, communicate well with the public, listen to concerns and come up with options that will work for the people. We need to put together a document that everyone in the Virgin Islands can agree on."

Sekou said that the success or failure of the convention can be measured by the seriousness

of the delegates elected.

Abramson agreed, warning voters to make their choices of delegates carefully.

"We're electing citizens to be our forefathers," Abramson said. "We're choosing people to be the next George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Alexander Hamilton. We're asking people to frame the structure of our constitution and government. It's a huge undertaking."

- Contact Megan Poiniski at 774-8772 ext. 304 or e-mail mpoiniski@dailynews.vi.