

# V.I. government, Senate win Black Hole Award

By **JONATHAN AUSTIN**  
Daily News Staff

The Society of Professional Journalists has awarded its top national honor for lack of transparency to the government of the Virgin Islands.

The annual Black Hole Award was given to the government for what the organization called the V.I. government's "bald and breathtaking contempt of the public's right to know."

Jonathan Anderson, chairman of the Society of Professional Journalists' Freedom of Information Committee, condemned the V.I. government and Senate's lack of openness in the award announcement issued Thursday.

"What's happening in the U.S. Virgin Islands is unacceptable," he said. "Citizens deserve a government that is more open and responsive, and they should remember that in the next election."

The government was nominated for the award by The Virgin Islands Daily News for its disregard for the territory's public records law; for Gov. Kenneth Mapp's stated willingness to ignore public record requests; for Mapp's stated belief that he has the right to alter records before they are released; and for his stated policy that there is no one in Government House tasked with an-



Kenneth Mapp



Neville James

swering public record requests.

"I think the award signifies the serious and really shocking problems that have been happening in the USVI," Anderson said. "I was taken aback by the government's brazen attempts to conceal information and, in fact, mislead citizens. The governor — neither he nor the Senate are above the law. This puts a spotlight on that, and hopefully it will bring attention to this issue and change that."

V.I. Code defines public records to include all records and documents of or belonging to the territory or any branch of government in the territory or any department, board, council or committee of any branch of government.

According to the law, all residents of the Virgin Islands have the right to inspect government documents and records, and the law notes that

"it shall be unlawful for any person to deny or refuse any citizen of this territory any right under this chapter, or to cause any such right to be denied or refused."

However, the executive branch and the Legislature have ignored legal public record requests for months.

The Society of Professional Journalists award specifically mentioned the Senate for its failure to disclose how much money some legislators have spent at a legislative conference in Seattle.

"Even to experienced professionals who battle government obstruction and lack of transparency every day, the Virgin Islands government's failures to make itself open and accountable stand out for their outrageous disregard of the public's right to know," said Jason Robbins, publisher of The Daily News. "For decades, The Daily News has devoted time and money to the fight to hold those in positions of power accountable to the people whose trust they hold — and often abuse. This recognition by the Society of Professional Journalists is a reassuring confirmation of our belief that the people of our islands deserve better from their government."

The government was nominated for the Society of Professional Jour-

nalists distinction for a variety of reasons. Among them are its failures to comply with the V.I. Code, including its failure to respond to public records requests; the executive branch's efforts to rewrite transition reports authored by the deJongh administration before supplying them to The Daily News; for how government agencies under the executive branch fail to respond to requests in a timely manner; and for efforts by Government House to hide details about wasteful personal spending and actions at all levels that violate either the law or rigid government guidelines.

"Transparency in government is not an end in itself, despite the fact that most citizens agree that democratic government should be open to its citizens. But transparency is the way we achieve honesty and accountability," said Tommy Thomason, director of the Texas Center for Community Journalism and a professor of journalism at the Schieffer School of Journalism at Texas Christian University.

"It's the way we make sure government operates in the public interest. When the books and records and meetings are open to everyone, that's the best way to make sure we get the kind of government we all want. And the press is just a watchdog — it's

the media's job to bark whenever a meeting is closed or access to a record is denied," he said.

"Most Americans won't hear about this award, but journalists will," Thomason said. "The award shows that the Virgin Islands has an aggressive and responsible press, and journalists throughout the U.S. will take notice."

Anderson said such attention might pay dividends.

"Maybe it prompts outside groups to look into the issues and do something about it. There are other organizations that are devoted to transparent government. It could prompt other journalistic actions," he said.

The Society of Professional Journalists' mission statement says the organization, founded in 1909, "is dedicated to the perpetuation of a free press as the cornerstone of our nation and our liberty."

"To ensure that the concept of self-government outlined by the U.S. Constitution remains a reality into future centuries, the American people must be well informed in order to make decisions regarding their lives, and their local and national communities," the mission statement says.

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## Governor's Agenda

Today

No public appearances are scheduled.

Note: Gov. Kenneth Mapp's public agenda is provided by Government House.

## Senate Agenda

Today

No meetings scheduled.

## Deaths

### Rufus Isaac Bellot

Relatives and friends are advised of the passing of Rufus Isaac Bellot, formerly of Dominica, who died at Schneider Regional Medical Center on Sunday, March 13, 2016, at the age of 92.

He is survived by his wife, Marta Bellot; sons, Isaac Bellot, William (Web) Bellot, Robert Bellot, Peter Bellot; daughters, Leontine Bellot, Marina Armour, Seraphine and Sandra; 31 grandchildren; 30 great-grandchildren; 6 great-great-grandchildren; and many other relatives and friends.

Relatives and friends are respectfully invited to attend the viewing



Rufus Isaac Bellot

on Sunday, March 20, 2016, from 3 to 5 p.m. at the Celestial Chapel at Hurley Funeral Home.

Arrangements are under the care of Hurley Funeral Home and Cremation Center of St. Thomas and St.

John.

For online condolences, please visit [www.hurleydavisfuneralhome.com](http://www.hurleydavisfuneralhome.com).

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