

U.S. Rep Steaming On MLSC Veto

Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — The chairman of the House Interior Subcommittee on Territories, Rep. Philio Burton, D-California, says he wants to be notified in advance the next time a U.S. official in the Trust Territory vetoes a federal program there.

Burton was referring pointedly to the action by High Commissioner Edward Johnston who announced on Oct. 24 that he was vetoing the \$600,000 grant for Micronesian legal services corp.

"We don't want to dictate from 10,000 miles away," Burton told Johnston and members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior at a hearing Tuesday, "but on a matter where common sense dictates, I think it's useful that we be kept informed." Such advance notice would have saved "a great deal of time and suffering," Burton said.

Burton was one of several witnesses, including Johnston, members of the Micronesian congress and Interior Department Territories Director Stanley Carpenter, who appeared before the subcommittee to request a supplemental appropriation of at least \$8.2 million.

The subject of the \$600,000 legal services veto is a sensitive one with Johnston. The Office of Economic Opportunity is reviewing the situation, has met with local officials of the program and members of the Micronesian congress this week and is expected to reach a decision soon on whether to overrule the HiCom.

Meanwhile, the legal services program in the TT has borrowed \$115,000 to carry on the program.

The money ran out yesterday.

Johnston opposes the legal operation on the grounds that it is an expensive effort that encourages legal actions against the TT government and is not subject to the same budget accountability as other federal programs.

Chairman Julia Butler Hansen, D-Washington, reminded Burton that the legal services program was not part of her subcommittee's jurisdiction. She added that she hoped the money was being put to the use of helping people and not on "legalistic businesses" such as obstructing material progress.

Congress appropriated only \$47 million of the approximate \$60 million that Micronesian officials requested. The Interior Department and Office of Management and Budget are supporting the move to get \$8.2 million of the difference—money to be used for capital improvements, including \$4.5 million for building the new Ponape hospital. Local officials are asking Congress for the full \$13 million difference, which includes money to build the Palau bridge from Koror to Babelthup.