

FLEMING EXPLAINS CON-CON VIEWS ON LEGISLATURE'S BUDGET

The public education campaign on the proposed Constitutional Amendments will undertake a careful explanation of the Legislature's budget at the village meetings scheduled this week, according to Esther Fleming, Vice Chair of the Post-Convention Committee. "The Con-Con delegates were unanimous in approval of the proposed Amendment #2 on the Legislative Branch," Fleming said. "Every single delegate voted in favor of Amendment #2 on the Legislative Branch on second and final reading except Mariano Taitano, who was in the hospital and could not come to the session, and Dr. Camacho who had to be absent that day on account of a death in his family. The vote was 25 to 0 on Amendment #2. So now we need to explain to the public why we believe these changes are so important."

The budget provisions for the Legislature were a key part of the package, according to Fleming, and were adopted only after careful study of a number of possible alternatives and extensive public hearings and discussion. "First, we wanted to provide each legislator with enough money to do his or her job properly," Fleming said. The budget limitations allow the legislators a salary, currently set at \$39,000 plus benefits, and an allowance of \$70,000 each year for office and other expenses. The \$39,000 salary is higher than all but a handful of the States provide for their legislators. "The salary and expense allowance gives each legislator a little over \$100,000 a year of discretionary spending. We thought that was enough," Fleming reported, "and no legislator or anyone else who testified or wrote to us said anything to the contrary. We felt very comfortable with the \$100,000 number."

"Our second consideration was whether to give each legislator the same amount of money each year," Fleming said. Legislative salaries have been at an equal level for House and Senate members, since the first Constitution set the salary level at \$8,000 in 1976. Legislative expenses, however, have been at a higher level for the Senate than the House. The budget for the Legislature has been divided evenly between the Senate and the House, so that the 9 members of the Senate each get a larger share from the Senate's half than the 18 members of the House get from the House's half. And members of the majority party get larger shares in each chamber than minority members. "We considered all the possible justifications for the current system," Fleming said, "and we didn't think that the larger amounts for some members over others were based on good policy. Almost everyone whom we consulted agreed that the larger amounts for the majority party members resulted in instability in the Legislature, with coups and counter-coups in the leadership at times. No one testified or wrote to us in support of this system."

When Speaker Benavente testified before the Committee on Legislative Branch and Public Finance, he supported a \$100,000 per member expense account, according to Tomas B. Aldan, who chaired that Committee. "The Speaker said, and I quote, 'A good figure for a member to have, even as a minority, would be about \$100,000.' When he testified, he told us that he supported giving majority and minority members the same amount and that he supported the downsizing of both the House and Senate that we were proposing," Aldan said. "We

adjusted the \$100,000 figure, recommended by the Speaker and Representative Hofschneider, a little bit to \$70,000 and we provided that the Legislative Bureau would meet some of the expenses individual members now have to meet from their allowances,” Aldan said. “We basically followed the Speaker’s recommendations, and we need to meet with him to reassure him that we have taken care of the problems he spoke about the other day. We think the members will actually have more support under our proposal than the Speaker recommended when he testified before our committee.”

“Our third objective was to make sure that the legislators had the staff support and the help they need to run their committees efficiently and to make good laws,” Vice Chair Esther Fleming said. The proposed Amendment #2 provides that the Legislative Bureau gets a little over \$2.0 million as compared with the \$800,000 in the current Constitution. The \$800,000 limitation would be deleted under Amendment #2. Tomas Aldan explained that the legislative appropriation, after the salaries and expenses for the individual members are paid, goes to the Legislative Bureau. With this funding, the Legislative Bureau is required to provide for staff help for individual legislators, maintaining the daily journals and library, the staffing of each of the legislative committees, the necessary travel for legislative purposes to Rota and Tinian, all the clerical needs of the House and the Senate, and all the other and day to day operational expenses of the Legislature, according to Aldan.

Convention President Herman T. Guerrero, who is also Chair of the Post-Convention Committee and who has served as a member of the House of Representatives said on Amendment #2: “I know that I would have been better off as a legislator with this provision in place, and I think all legislators in the future will also be better off. I am very proud that the Convention was able to come up with amendments on Article 2 that everyone in the Convention could support. I think that the public will support them as well.”