



HOUSE JOURNAL SECOND REGULAR SESSION, 2025

4th Day, Second Regular Session

Saturday, September 27, 2025

The House of Representatives of the Twenty-Fourth Northern Marianas Commonwealth Legislature convened its Fourth Day, Second Regular Session on Saturday, September 27, 2025, at 1:05 p.m., in the House Chamber on Capitol Hill, Saipan, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Upon a two-thirds vote of the members present, the session was declared an emergency session in accordance with Rule III, Section 7 of the House Rules.

The Honorable Edmund Joseph Sablan Villagomez, Speaker of the House, presided.

A moment of silence was observed.

ROLL CALL

The Clerk called the roll for attendance with the following results:

Representative Roy Christopher A. Ada	Present
Representative Vincent Raymond Aldan	Present
Representative Daniel Iwashita Aquino Jr.	Present
Representative Blas Jonathan "BJ" Tenorio Attao	Present
Representative Roman Cepeda Benavente	Present
Representative Angelo Atalig Camacho	Present
Representative Diego Vincent Fejeran Camacho	Present
Representative Joel Castro Camacho	Present
Representative Joseph Arriola Flores	Present
Representative Marissa Renee Flores	Absent (Excused)
Representative Thomas John Dela Cruz Manglona	Present
Representative Julie Marie Atalig Ogo	Present
Representative Malcolm Jason Omar	Present
Representative Raymond Ulloa Palacios	Present
Representative Elias Jerome Malite Rangamar	Absent (Excused)
Representative John Paul Palacios Sablan	Present
Representative Patrick Hofschneider San Nicolas	Present
Representative Edmund Joseph Sablan Villagomez	Present
Representative Denita Kaipat Yangetmai	Present
Representative Ralph Naraja Yumul	Present

Clerk Linda B. Muna: Mr. Speaker, 18 members are present and 2 members are absent.

Speaker Edmund Joseph Sablan Villagomez: Thank you, Clerk. With 18 members present, a quorum is duly established. Let the record reflect that Representatives Elias Rangamar and Marissa

Flores are excused for today's session. I appoint Representative Ralph Yumul as Floor Leader Pro Tem. Any objections?

There were no objections on the floor, and the Chair recognized the Acting Floor Leader.

The Acting Floor Leader moved to declare an emergency session.

RULE III. SESSIONS AND MEETINGS.

Section 7. Emergency Sessions.

If, by reason of typhoon, flood, or fire, or law enforcement or other bona fide legislative emergency, there is need for expedited action by the House to meet the emergency, the Speaker may provide for a meeting site other than the regular meeting site and notice requirements shall be suspended during such emergency. In the event of an emergency meeting the House:

- (a) State in writing the reasons for its finding that an emergency exists;
- (b) Take a vote whereby two-thirds (14) of all members of the House agree that an emergency exists;
- (c) File an emergency agenda and the findings on the emergency with the Clerk.

The motion was seconded; the Chair opened the floor for discussion. There being no discussion on the floor, the Chair recognized the Clerk to call the roll.

The Clerk called the roll on the motion to declare an emergency session with the following results:

Representative Roy Christopher A. Ada	Yes
Representative Vincent Raymond Aldan	Yes
Representative Daniel Iwashita Aquino Jr.	Yes
Representative Blas Jonathan "BJ" Tenorio Attao	Yes
Representative Roman Cepeda Benavente	Yes
Representative Angelo Atalig Camacho	Yes
Representative Diego Vincent Fejeran Camacho	Yes
Representative Joel Castro Camacho	Yes
Representative Joseph Arriola Flores	Yes
Representative Marissa Renee Flores	Absent (Excused)
Representative Thomas John Dela Cruz Manglona	Yes
Representative Julie Marie Atalig Ogo	Yes
Representative Malcolm Jason Omar	Yes
Representative Raymond Ulloa Palacios	Yes
Representative Elias Jerome Malite Rangamar	Absent (Excused)
Representative John Paul Palacios Sablan	Yes
Representative Patrick Hofschneider San Nicolas	Yes
Representative Edmund Joseph Sablan Villagomez	Yes
Representative Denita Kaipat Yangetmai	Yes
Representative Ralph Naraja Yumul	Yes

Clerk Linda B. Muna: Mr. Speaker, 18 members present voted “yes.”

Speaker Edmund Joseph Sablan Villagomez: Thank you, Clerk. With all 18 members voting “yes,” an emergency declaration has been established. We will now proceed to Item No. 2, Public Comments. The podium is now open to receive any comments. Please state your name and the entity you represent, you have five minutes. If you have prepared statements, please submit them to the Sergeant-at-Arms for forwarding to the Clerk’s office.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Public comments were presented by one individual on the following item:

H. B. No. 24-46, HD1, SS1: To Define and Identify General Revenues and approve revenues and resources of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands as identified pursuant to Article III, Section 9 (a) of the CNMI Constitution, as amended, and 1 CMC Division 7, for Fiscal Year 2026 and make appropriations for the operations and activities of the Government of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, its agencies, instrumentalities, and independent programs, and to provide budget authority for government corporations for Fiscal Year 2026; and for other purposes.

There being no further public comments presented, and no items under Item No. 3, Adoption of Journals, through Item No. 6, Messages from the Governor, the Chair moved to Item No. 7, Senate Communications, and recognized the Clerk.

ADOPTION OF JOURNALS

None

INTRODUCTIONS OF BILLS

House Bills:

None

House Local Bills:

None

House Legislative Initiatives:

None

INTRODUCTIONS OF RESOLUTIONS

House Resolutions:

None

House Joint Resolutions:

None

House Commemorative Resolutions:

None

House Concurrent Resolutions:

None

MESSAGES FROM THE GOVERNOR

None

SENATE COMMUNICATIONS

The Clerk announced the following Senate Communications:

SEN.COMM. 24-54: (9/26/2025) Returning H. B. No. 24-46, HD1, entitled, “To Define and Identify General Revenues and approve revenues and resources of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands as identified pursuant to Article III, Section 9 (a) of the CNMI Constitution, as amended, and 1 CMC Division 7, for Fiscal Year 2026 and make appropriations for the operations and activities of the Government of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, its agencies, instrumentalities, and independent programs, and to provide budget authority for government corporations for Fiscal Year 2026; and for other purposes.”, which was passed by the Senate with amendments on September 26, 2025, in the form of H. B. No. 24-46, HD1, SS1. [For action on Senate amendments]

The Chair recognized the Acting Floor Leader.

The Acting Floor Leader moved to accept Senate Communication No. 24-54.

The motion was seconded; the Chair opened the floor for discussion. There being no discussion on the floor, the motion to accept Senate Communication No. 24-54 was carried by voice vote. There was no “nay” vote.

Pursuant to the action taken, Senate Communication No. 24-54, referencing, “Returning H. B. No. 24-46, entitled, “To Define and Identify General Revenues and approve revenues and resources of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands as identified pursuant to Article

III, Section 9 (a) of the CNMI Constitution, as amended, and 1 CMC Division 7, for Fiscal Year 2026 and make appropriations for the operations and activities of the Government of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, its agencies, instrumentalities, and independent programs, and to provide budget authority for government corporations for Fiscal Year 2026; and for other purposes.”, which was passed by the Senate with amendments on September 26, 2025, in the form of H. B. No. 24-46, HD1, SS1.,” was placed on the bill calendar.

There being no items under Item No. 8, House Communications, through Item No. 15, Resolution Calendar, the Chair moved down to Item No. 16, Bill Calendar, and recognized the Acting Floor Leader.

HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS

None

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE JUDICIAL BRANCH

None

COMMUNICATIONS FROM DEPARTMENTS & AGENCIES

None

MISCELLANEOUS BUSINESS

None

REPORTS OF STANDING COMMITTEES

None

REPORTS OF SPECIAL AND CONFERENCE COMMITTEES

None

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

None

RESOLUTION CALENDAR

None

BILL CALENDAR

The Acting Floor Leader moved to suspend Rule VII, Section 9 and Rule IX, Sections 9 and 10.

The motion was seconded; the Chair opened the floor for discussion. There being no discussion on the floor, the motion to suspend Rule VII, Section 9 and Rule IX, Sections 9 and 10 was carried by voice vote. There was no “nay” vote.

The Acting Floor Leader moved for the passage of First and Final Reading of H. B. No. 24-46, HD1, SS1:

H.B. No. 24-46, HD1, SS1: To Define and Identify General Revenues and approve revenues and resources of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands as identified pursuant to Article III, Section 9 (a) of the CNMI Constitution, as amended, and 1 CMC Division 7, for Fiscal Year 2026 and make appropriations for the operations and activities of the Government of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, its agencies, instrumentalities, and independent programs, and to provide budget authority for government corporations for Fiscal Year 2026; and for other purposes.

The motion was seconded; the Chair opened the floor for discussion. There being no discussion on the floor, the Chair recognized the Clerk to call the roll for the vote.

The Clerk called the roll on the motion for the passage of H. B. No. 24-46, HD1, SS1, First and Final Reading, with the following results:

Representative Roy Christopher A. Ada	Yes
---------------------------------------	-----

Speaker Edmund Joseph Sablan Villagomez: Clerk, I apologize. I would like to recognize, under discussion, Representative John Paul Sablan.

Representative John Paul Sablan Palacios: I apologize, Mr. Speaker. I know we are all so eager to pass a budget. But with that said, Mr. Speaker and colleagues, I appear before you today as your Chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means, with gratitude and respect for the work accomplished over the past few days. This has been a demanding process, but it has also has been a moment when the legislature has shown responsibility, unity, and a commitment to our people in the face of difficult fiscal realities. First, I thank my colleagues on the House side and the members of the Senate Committee on Fiscal Affairs for their diligence, cooperation, and dedication. I especially acknowledge Senator Jude Hofschneider, the Chairman of Fiscal Affairs, for his leadership and partnership. I also extend my deepest appreciation to the staff of the Legislative Bureau. Your professionalism and steady commitment throughout this process have been essential. On behalf of my committee and my colleagues, I sincerely thank you. Let us also remember that this house did its part when we passed our version of the budget on August 15, 2025, and transmitted it to the Senate. From that day forward, we stood steady to move the process along. Over the past three days, we have witnessed something too rare: genuine cooperation between our two chambers without the need for a formal conference committee. Instead, members of the House and the Senate fiscal committees worked directly to reconcile differences and

produced the budget before us today. We have met in both chambers and have been assisted by Ms. Vicky Villagomez of the Office of Management and Budget, Secretary of Finance Tracy Norita, and Mr. Sixto Igisomar of the Department of Public Lands, who provided valuable input. We also met with Delegate Kimberly King-Hinds, who shared that the Office of Insular Affairs is working with her office to render assistance to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, provided that we demonstrate fiscal reform. This type of cooperation between our local government and partners in Washington, D.C., is unprecedented, and it reflects the kind of collaboration that will be essential as we move forward. Colleagues, as we consider this budget, let us remember the communication we received from the administration just days ago outlining the Commonwealth's financial condition. There has been discussion about why this budget does not immediately reflect the Governor's message reducing revenue projections to \$156,000,000. The reason is simple: we must be deliberate. We must measure three times and cut once. Acting without planning would be irresponsible. We cannot cut the Judiciary, the Public School System, or the Executive Branch further without consultation with those stakeholders. That input was not available in the few days we had to finalize this budget. What we can do – and what we must do – is prepare better for the next round of adjustments, so reductions are made with careful analysis and participation from those directly affected. What we need are equitable reforms and reasonable austerity measures that reflect the size and core functions of each branch. If there are cuts to be made in order to right-size, cuts must be strategic – targeting only what is really excess, not where they would cripple essential services. Take this Legislative Branch for an example, we have fewer than 30 employees serving 29 members. That is less than 60 people in total. This branch cannot afford to cut 6 employees without crippling its ability to function. One of the key provisions in this budget is funding for our Public School System. The Public School System will receive \$31,900,000, as the constitution mandates 25 percent of general revenues. While some may call for 25 percent of gross revenues, the truth is that we cannot afford that today. Our duty is to balance this budget and protect the stability of government operations. At the same time, the Public School System must also do its part. We cannot afford a top-heavy central management structure at the expense of instructional days. Our children should never be used as political pawns in the budget debate. It is unrealistic to demand \$49,000,000 when every branch of government is asked to reduce spending. And when cost-saving measures, such as travel bans, are imposed, they should be implemented during summer months – not after classes begin. The games must end. Our focus must remain on protecting instructional time and serving the needs of our students. This budget has done that. It prioritizes teachers and school staff over central government. We have put students first by passing this budget. Today, the Legislature has acted to keep our government open, our schools funded, and essential services running. This budget is a safeguard against a shutdown. At the same time, we remain committed to working with the administration in the days ahead to carefully realign this budget to the fiscal ceiling in a responsible manner. We must also be honest: right-sizing will be necessary. Our government must reflect the fiscal realities of a tourism industry that has not yet recovered. These decisions will not be easy, but they are essential if we are to sustain a government that lives within its means. And as we make these adjustments, we must also strengthen the Marianas Visitors Authority, because tourism remains our primary economic engine. While we right size, we must also diversify – building a broader economic base that includes new industries, new investments, and new opportunities for our people. At the same time, we recognize the possibility of the Marianas Public Land Trust executing its \$29,000,000 loan to the Commonwealth. In a perfect world, we would not need to borrow money to help pay for retirees, because that is not sustainable. But in this difficult economy, we may have to do so one

last time to get through these challenges. But we must also commit to never putting ourselves in this position again – never reaching the point where borrowing from the Trust becomes necessary. Our duty is to make structural reforms and sound fiscal decisions now so that future generations are not forced to rely on such measures. Mr. Speaker and colleagues, this budget represents responsibility in the face of challenges. We have done our part to keep the government open, our school funded, and our people served. For that, I thank you. I look forward to working with Governor Apatang to pass a modified budget that has his input and the input of all stakeholders in the three branches of the Commonwealth Government. And I ask you all for your full support.

The Chair recognized Representative Daniel Iwashita Aquino, Jr.

Representative Daniel Iwashita Aquino, Jr.: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and honorable colleagues. Although I was not directly involved in the budget deliberation, I want to say that today marks a milestone for the passage of the \$179,000,000 budget that evolved in the Senate, a significant milestone in our continued efforts to keep the government functioning and to support the vital services our people rely on. While this amount exceeds the \$159,000,000 that was proposed by the Governor, a figure that I am more personally inclined to support due to its conservative and realistic approach – I remain optimistic that we can work together to drive revenue-generating measures. I am optimistic that we, in both chambers, will continue introducing and advancing meaningful revenue generating legislation that will help bridge the gap between projected spending and actual income. I want to ask the Senate, I know I have been repeatedly asking them, that sometimes they look at these bills that come before them, such as House Bill No. 24-54. That is my bill, and it is stuck in the Senate. The military leave I am asking them for in that bill exceeds up to 30 days. What the people do not realize is that when our servicemembers go for training, they get good salary. And my colleague, Representative Vincent Aldan, can attest to that. When Mommy asks or Honest asks, Daddy gives or Daddy sends. Sometimes they earn up to \$5,000, over \$5,000 in a month, because they are getting paid a lot of money and they remit the money back to Saipan, to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. In the Senate, I asked them to please look at some of the bills, because some of them they have to think outside the box. It reflects on revenue-generating and efficiency. Like my colleague, Representative Joseph Flores' bill, for the House to have its own, or the Legislature to have its own, procurement process or finance. I am asking the public to please lobby for House Bill No. 24-54. And everyone that was involved in the budget, thank you all for your hard work. I want to thank my colleague, Chairman Sablan. Our staff are there in Laly 4. Unfortunately, I am not there. And actually, it is a lot better in here because it is cooler. But our staff are out there. My colleague, Chairman Sablan – we are always working for Precinct 2. And to the viewing public, we have a lot of apartments available in Precinct 2. It is nice; it is clean. Thank you.

The Chair recognized Representative Roman Cepeda Benevente.

Representative Roman Cepeda Benevente: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Members, I would like to really acknowledge all the efforts that have been put together during these past few weeks. And I would like to acknowledge the Secretary of Finance, Tracy Norita, and Vicky Villagomez for really working with us hand-in-hand, trying to craft this budget that is needed for the entire community, for the entire people of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. It reflects on my side that, for the first time also, I have seen the Senate members work together, joined

together with the House members, and it was an eye opener for me. But I see the cohesiveness that could be put together as far as working together as lawmakers and assuring to be putting aside our own personal interest and putting the interest of the people. That is what puts us together, and I feel comfortable with that. On another note, moving forward, I would like to mention a few things about PSS, the Public School System, the schools. We have not passed the budget yet, and they are already telling the schools to turn off their air conditioning and everything as far as their usage and expenditures goes. They are already telling them to do that, and we have not even come up with the figures on whether they are going to be cut so much or not. I think it is a matter of management as far as they are concerned. I have personally gone to the school myself, at least in my precinct. I have gone through all the schools in my precinct, and I have met with those people. Since I am the Committee Chair of Education here in the Legislature, I have met with those people. I am not scared to say this because I have met with them, and I communicate with them. But still, I just heard that they are trying to do another town hall meeting, another series of town hall meetings. Fine, that is good, because we also have to let the people know that this budget is not only for themselves. We also need this budget to pay all the other individuals who are working for the government. They have to understand that if they shut down the budget, if we shut down the budget, or if we would have taken the money and given more to the Public School System and less to the working individuals in the government, what would happen? Even their own kids that are going to school, their parents will not be able to afford to pay for their needs and everything with regard to that. So, if you look at the totality of the operations and everything of what we do, it affects everything. Whether they like it or not, it affects everything. And that is one thing they have to be keen about because there is no such thing as “free lunch” nowadays, and they have to understand that. I am going to be very vocal about it, on how they do things and how we do things, too, but we have to be fair. What we did in this budget is fair. We got the Senate involved. I never thought the Senate would ever come around and involve themselves too, but it shows that there is good rapport among us. So, let us put together whatever we can. Mr. Speaker and members, thank you for the opportunity, and thank you to those people who were involved in crafting this bill. Thank you.

The Chair recognized Representative Thomas John Dela Cruz Manglona.

Representative Thomas John Dela Cruz Manglona: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Mr. Chairman of Ways and Means. Also, our Fiscal Affairs Committee from the Senate. Like our colleague mentioned, the collaboration between these last few days has been very welcoming. We see what we can do we really sit down and work together to pass this budget. I think, moving forward, knowing our current financial situation and economic situation, what is the most needed right now is just communication, communication between us, communication between all the branches of the government, and especially, like you said, the agencies that are being affected. Obviously, this budget is not a final product; it is a moving target. But I think, as long as we continue the collaboration, and again, I would want to thank our Governor Apatang and Lieutenant Governor Mendiola for also sitting down together at the table and bringing everybody – we are seeing the differences when we just put our differences aside and truly sit down, put our efforts together, and work for the people. I am hoping, moving forward, we can continue this collaboration, maybe not just for the budget, but also, like I said, for certain bills. Maybe we can create some sort of working group that can meet every now and then to discuss bills and legislations that we want to move so that our priorities are in order with the Senate’s, and we can

address each other's concerns. Again, I just want to thank you all. Of all my years in the Legislature, this is my third year in the Legislature, this is my first time seeing this kind of collaboration, and I welcome it. I hope it continues. Thank you, and have a great day and a great weekend.

The Chair recognized Representative Julie Marie Atalig Ogo.

Representative Julie Marie Atalig Ogo: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to also extend my sincere gratitude to Fiscal Affairs Chairman Jude Hofschneider and its members and to Ways and Means Chairman John Paul Sablan and my colleagues in the House of Representatives. I also thank all who play critical roles throughout our joint meetings on the Fiscal Year 2026 budget. The dedicated staff of the Legislative Bureau, our House and Senate Legal Counsels, Secretary of Finance Norita, Office of Management and Budget, Director Vicky Villagomez, and Department of Public Land, Secretary Igisomar. I equally recognize the active participation and input of our municipal mayors and department heads. It is not an easy task to work with very limited funds, but together we navigated these challenges with professionalism and commitment. At the end of the day, sacrifices must be made, and we must all continue to work within our means. Each of us is accountable to ensure that we fulfill our responsibilities and uphold the trust placed in us to lead the Commonwealth. Lastly, I wish to thank Governor David Apatang and Lieutenant Governor Dennis Mendiola for their transparency in openly sharing our government's current financial situation with the community. Their openness reinforces the importance of collaboration and trust as we move forward. Let us continue to work together in the spirit of accountability and unity for the people of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Representative Julie Marie Atalig Ogo: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to also extend my sincere gratitude to Fiscal Affairs Chairman Jude Hofschneider and its members, and to Ways and Means Chairman John Paul Sablan and my colleagues in the House of Representatives. I also thank all who play critical roles throughout our joint meetings on the Fiscal Year 2026 budget: the dedicated staff of the Legislative Bureau, our House and Senate Legal Counsels, Secretary of Finance Norita, Office of Management and Budget Director Vicky Villagomez, and Department of Public Land Secretary Igisomar. I equally recognize the active participation and input of our municipal mayors and department heads. It is not an easy task to work with very limited funds, but together we navigated these challenges with professionalism and commitment. At the end of the day, sacrifices must be made, and we must all continue to work within our means. Each of us is accountable to ensure that we fulfill our responsibilities and uphold the trust placed in us to lead the Commonwealth. Lastly, I wish to thank Governor David Apatang and Lieutenant Governor Dennis Mendiola for their transparency in openly sharing our government's current financial situation with the community. Their openness reinforces the importance of collaboration and trust as we move forward. Let us continue to work together in the spirit of accountability and unity for the people of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker Edmund Joseph Sablan Villagomez: Before I call for the vote, and I apologize for that, Clerk, I want to extend my appreciation and my gratefulness to Chairman John Paul Sablan and the members of the Ways and Means Committee, Senator Jude Hofschneider and the members of the Fiscal Affairs Committee, the members of the House, our Legislative Bureau staff, the Fiscal Analysts, the Legislative Assistants, the Legal Counsels, the Clerks, and other Legislative Bureau

staff that have made this bill and the work that made this bill possible. I also thank our staff in each of our offices too, because they have assisted. To the administration, the governor and the lieutenant governor, for coming to the table and discussing the real situation of our finances; the Department of Finance and Office of Management and Budget, and other agencies, for their cooperation and coming together to work together to put together a product that we can agree to disagree, but this was something we all came and we can agree upon. And, as mentioned earlier, this is not going to be the final product. I know the work continues after this, but with this collaboration, I think we can meet the deadline and also meet our goals, and hopefully come up with a fair and balanced product. So, with that, thank you, everyone. With nothing further, Clerk, please call the roll again.

The Clerk called the roll on the motion for the passage of H. B. No. 24-46, HD1, SS1, First and Final, with the following results:

Representative Roy Christopher A. Ada	Yes
Representative Vincent Raymond Aldan	Yes
Representative Daniel Iwashita Aquino Jr.	Yes
Representative Blas Jonathan “BJ” Tenorio Attao	Yes
Representative Roman Cepeda Benavente	Yes
Representative Angelo Atalig Camacho	Yes
Representative Diego Vincent Fejeran Camacho	Yes
Representative Joel Castro Camacho	Yes
Representative Joseph Arriola Flores	Yes
Representative Marissa Renee Flores	Absent (Excused)
Representative Thomas John Dela Cruz Manglona	Yes
Representative Julie Marie Atalig Ogo	Yes
Representative Malcolm Jason Omar	Yes
Representative Raymond Ulloa Palacios	Yes
Representative Elias Jerome Malite Rangamar	Absent (Excused)
Representative John Paul Palacios Sablan	Yes
Representative Patrick Hofschneider San Nicolas	Yes
Representative Edmund Joseph Sablan Villagomez	Yes
Representative Denita Kaipat Yangetmai	Yes
Representative Ralph Naraja Yumul	Yes

Clerk Linda B. Muna: Mr. Speaker, 18 members present voted “yes.”

Speaker Edmund Joseph Sablan Villagomez: Thank you, Clerk. With all 18 members voting “yes,” House Bill No. 24-46, House Draft 1, Senate Substitute 1, hereby passes the House. Thank you, colleagues. We now move down to Item No. 17, Miscellaneous Businesses, and the floor is open.

MISCELLANEOUS BUSINESS

The Chair recognized Representative Blas Jonathan “BJ” Tenorio Attao.

Representative Blas Jonathan “BJ” Tenorio Attao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First and foremost, thank you to the colleagues for supporting House Bill No. 24-46, HD1, SS1. We have met another deadline for the administration to sign this legislation into law, so we can avert a government shutdown. We all, as we did with the \$29,000,000, worked within the time period that was given to us, and we were able to get that to the administration. And I surely hope that those negotiations are going on with the Marianas Pacific Land Trust and the administration. That being said, I would like to extend our appreciation to our chairman of Ways and Means, John Paul Sablan, for leading the House—not just to his members within the Ways and Means, but to all the members of the House. Thank you all for being a part of the meeting, sharing your thoughts, and throwing out ideas there on how to improve this legislation so that we can get to the next level, which we will be working on starting Monday. To Chairman Jude Hofschneider and the members of Fiscal Affairs, thank you all for your collaboration and working together so that we can prevent a conference committee and get this legislation to the governor’s desk and prevent a shutdown. I understand that the numbers that were presented to us by the administration were given on Monday, and we made this promise: before we tackle that issue, we would make sure that we do not get into a government shutdown. We have done that. We are giving the administration some time. I am not going to say a large amount of time, but some time—to review this budget so that they, Governor Apatang and Lieutenant Governor Mendiola, can look at this bill and see what they like and remove those that they do not like. But, at the very least, sign the bill into law so we can prevent a government shutdown. That was the approach. First and foremost, the most important thing for both committees was to avert a government shutdown. And with the assistance of the Office of Management and Budget and Finance, they were able to send that message to the administration, and they supported that message, knowing the fact that we are going to get back together and start working on not just the amendment to the budget that we passed today, but also on legislation to help our situation here in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Where there are cost-cutting measures that need legislation, we are going to work on that. Or legislations to improve our financial status, we are going to work on that. This is going to be a working group. And it helps a lot when we are able to sit in the same room with the same type of information so that everybody gets to look at the fair numbers that are presented to everybody, not just one branch of government. Rather than relying on a document being sent this way, we were actually given live information, and that was very important for us to be able to make sound decisions and provide the very best for our people. We still have the challenges ahead of us. At least what we have done is we are going to avert a government shutdown. But I believe that working together with the leadership of Speaker Villagomez, the leadership of Senate President Neighbors, and the administration under the leadership of Governor Apatang and Lieutenant Governor Mendiola, I believe that we can get back to the table, dust off the work that we have done these last five days, and, obviously, with some food and drinks, we will be able to stay in the room and finish a product and present what is best for our people. Where not everybody is hurt, but everybody is helped. And that is where we want to get to. We are hoping that this \$29,000,000 negotiation can happen before we even get to that 10-day deadline we are hoping to get to. I believe the Marianas Pacific Land Trust will be meeting on Monday. I think on Monday or Tuesday. I believe it is very important for us members, along with our colleagues in the Senate and the administration, to participate and show up to that meeting. I hope that the negotiations will lead to a contractual agreement between the administration and the Marianas Pacific Land Trust so that we can move forward with the loan, so we can free up that \$29,000,000, make the cuts that were presented to us by the administration, and move forward with the brand new budget. And then

work together for other legislation that will assist our financial situation here in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. With that being said, I want to thank everyone here for all the hard work that you guys have put into the budget process. We will continue to work together. To our colleagues in the Senate, thank you guys very much for staying back and holding that session at 6:00 p.m. so that we can address this bill today. And to our bureau staff, thank you guys for your commitment, your time, and your energy, and for sharing your thoughts as well on how we can move on with the budget. We know that we reserve many languages that will be placed in the next budget that we will be addressing in the very near future, and we will continue to work together. Let us make things easier. Mr. Speaker, thank you again for allowing us to continue working with all sides as we move on. Thank you, guys. And have a great day.

The Chair recognized Representative Roy Christopher Aldan Ada.

Representative Roy Christopher Aldan Ada: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Also, to everybody who worked and deliberated over this, thank you so much. To the public, we have deliberated for days, weeks, and hours to make sure that certain things are funded—for example, the Medicaid Office, the retirees' 25 percent, and the scholarship. A lot of work was done here. It was tough because we had no intention of hurting any agencies. We, just like Leader BJ Attao said, were not trying to hurt everybody, but were searching for ways to help the general public. I would like to thank everybody who participated in this process, as well as all the agencies that came and spoke during public comments about their needs. With your input, we carefully considered many points and incorporated them into how we strategized the bill. With that, thank you to the general public for their patience and their input. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Chair recognized Representative Ralph Naraja Yumul.

Representative Ralph Naraja Yumul: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank our powerful Chairman John Paul Sablan for coordinating all these budget meetings together. I know we gave him a hard time. I am glad that he saw past that and kept the ship moving forward. On another note, I also want to inform our good colleague and Chairman to look at the message memo sent by the Secretary of Finance to the Governor regarding the additional reduction of \$22,000,000 from the general fund. That is because of the decline in the economy. I am not too sure about the construction tax because I think some people in the administration consulted the administration and delayed the collection of the construction tax by amending that bill that I actually wrote. But in the last 2 years, I guess we have been practicing austerity, to go from 80 to 64 hours is drastic. I think going back to 70 hours would help stabilize the economy. If you look at the submittal by the Secretary of Finance, we only had a shortfall of \$2,800,000 for the whole year. Compared to the previous administration, I do not want to say the last administration, but yes, I said it, another administration, we are close to \$100,000,000 in losses every year. \$2,800,000, and now we are going to reduce the general fund again by \$20,000,000. I am not sold on that. Regarding the reduction in the forecast from the Marianas Visitors Authority, that is understandable. That money goes straight to the Marianas Visitors Authority from the hotel tax, so it does not affect the general fund. Every year, I mean this past year, the Secretary of Finance's appropriation versus expense, she always saved five million dollars in the first quarter and five point four million dollars in the second quarter. She is doing her job. The question now is, how much are we going to squeeze our employees, and what does that translate to when it goes to the economy? You are forcing the

economy to constrict, and that is very dangerous. That is something we should not consider. We should be very optimistic and go out there to look for investors. I know Representative Angelo Camacho and I visited Zo Motors in California, and that looks very promising. But that is in California, not here in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Still, we should be very optimistic about opening our doors and going out there to look and ask. With that, I would like to respectfully remind the Chairman to look at this message and call those meetings so that we can discuss this thoroughly. Thank you.

The Chair recognized Representative Daniel Iwashita Aquino, Jr.

Representative Daniel Iwashita Aquino, Jr.: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to echo the same sentiments as my colleague, Floor Leader Yumul. That I hope that the administration can try to soften the blow to hopefully 70 hours rather than 64. I know a lot of people are concerned, the working class. Especially those that are earning less than \$30,000. Someone approached me; well, people have been approaching me about salary cuts. And I take care of my dad, 88 years old, and he requires a certain diet. And let me tell you something, you know when you keep buying fish, your payday is gone in less than a week with just fish alone. You go through dialysis. So, I understand the hardship that people are going through. And sometimes, too, I want the public to understand we also are feeling it. That we are trying our best to help bring in these revenue-generating measures. And also, I want to echo the same sentiments as my colleague here, Representative Thomas Manglona, that hopefully, Mr. Speaker, we can have a working group between the House and the Senate to review some of these bills that are stalled, and maybe we can try moving them forward for the betterment of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Thank you.

The Chair recognized Representative John Paul Palacios Sablan.

Representative John Paul Palacios Sablan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to echo the same sentiments as my colleague, Floor Leader Yumul—that I hope the administration can try to soften the blow to hopefully 70 hours rather than 64. I know a lot of people are concerned, especially the working class, particularly those earning less than \$30,000. People have been approaching me about salary cuts. I take care of my dad, who is 88 years old, and he requires a certain diet. Let me tell you something: when you keep buying fish, your payday is gone in less than a week with just fish alone. You go through dialysis, so I understand the hardship that people are going through. Sometimes, too, I want the public to understand that we also are feeling it—that we are trying our best to help bring in these revenue-generating measures. Also, I want to echo the same sentiments as my colleague here, Representative Thomas Manglona. Hopefully, Mr. Speaker, we can have a working group between the House and the Senate to review some of these bills that are stalled, and maybe we can try moving them forward for the betterment of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Thank you.

The Chair recognized Representative Roman Cepeda Benavente.

Representative Roman Cepeda Benavente: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I missed one opportunity to mention something regarding the economic situation and the budget. I was informed by different individuals that government employees, such as directors and regular government employees like

journeymen, as well as those in the lower echelon of the group, have had their salaries remain stagnant for a long time. Their salaries were never raised. It was a stalemate and has been dormant for a while. They are concerned because they were originally civil service employees but were taken out of the civil service system. Unfortunately, I do not know who, in the past, shifted that directorship position to be a civil service employee. I am not going to go against that, but this is a concern from people who are working and want to be civil servants. They were originally civil service employees but were removed from it. Now, even if they want to apply for a loan from the bank to build a house or something, small-time employees trying to build a house are not able to get approved. The bank refuses them because there is no job stability. I know civil service members are also having a hard time securing loans, plus their salary is low. That is one thing I would like to share with other members. I have nothing against whatever was decided in the past, but we are moving forward. We have to look at the people working for the government who are also part of us. If we can help, why do we not lend a helping hand? From a layman's point of view, let us do it that way. Thank you, Mr. Speaker

The Chair recognized Representative Vincent Raymond Aldan.

Representative Vincent Raymond Aldan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Hopefully this budget does go all the way through and then come back and try to continue fixing the problem. I just wanted to let the people understand that we have done a lot to try to right the ship. And one of those things that we are doing is to also make sure that the government agencies are held accountable. I am not trying to say that nobody is responsible, but actions speak louder than words. With that being said, we have always deliberated on this thing, this budget, because of the government. "The government. The government." What about the people? What about the businesses? With that said, I just want to let the people understand that we are working on it. And one of those things that we are trying to do is hold every government agency responsible. And one of the things that we promise, or at least, I promised the people, is that we will fix these back billing issues. Okay, we are here to fix two problems at once: the burden of surprise back bills on our families and the fiscal strain on our public agencies during budget cuts. The bill that is forthcoming is built on a simple promise: fairness for the rate payers, discipline for agencies, and ethical collection that protects the core services. Let me start with what this means at the kitchen table. Too many of our residents have opened a bill and found months, sometimes years, of charges all at once. No warning, no explanation, just a number big enough to blow a family budget. The proposed bill ends that practice. It sets clear limits on how far back an agency can bill when the mistake was not the customer's fault. It requires advanced notice, an itemized explanation, and an affordable payment plan. So, a valid undercharge is repaid in small predictable installments, not as a shock to the household. Here is the human impact: if an agency discovers an underbilling, we convert that debt into a manageable plan of 24 to 36 months with fees and interest waived when the fault lies in the agency. We protect hardship customers with income-based terms, and we say plainly no disconnection for someone who is following their payment plan or has a valid dispute pending. That is not leniency. That is basic fairness, and it increases compliance. Now the second problem: our public finances are in austerity, every dollar matters. When agencies can lawfully and transparently recover verified underbilling, they stabilize their cash flow without running into the general fund. But there is a right way to recover. Steady, predictable inflows from a payment plan are better than a one-time spike that invites defaults and public anger. The proposed bill gives a lawful, transparent path that actually improves collection while lowering bad debt. Let me ground

that in numbers. Imagine an agency validates \$5,000,000 in underbilling spread across 8,000 accounts. That is about \$625 per account. Under a 24-month plan, the average is roughly \$26 per month. That is the difference between a repayment plan that people can manage and a default that helps no one. Another example: a hospital finds \$3,000,000 across 2,000 patients, about \$1,500 each over 36 months. That is about \$42 per month. Again, manageable, transparent, and payable. Fairness is not abstract; rewrite it into law with five guardrails. First, a look at the back limit. We cap how far back an agency can bill when the error is theirs: 12 months and reserve up to 24 months for cases of fraud or tampering. Families deserve this certainty. Second, transparency. Every back bill must disclose the periods, meter readings or records of rates used, and the cause of the error in plain language, no more black box statements. The affordable plan is a default 24 to 36-month authorization with fee and interest waivers when agency error caused the shortfall. Keep monthly payments small; keep people current. And the fourth, due process as an independent review and appeal path where collections are paused until a decision is made. That builds trust and improves repayments. Fifth, internal discipline. Agencies must conduct root cause analysis, adopt corrective action plans, certify fixes, and report quarterly to oversight. We do not just collect; we prevent repeat failures. To address the concern that this adds administrative burden, yes, there is some lift, templates, notice, and appeals handling. But the cost of chaos is higher. Standard forms, digital workflows, and a public dashboard will keep administration lean while giving the public visibility: how many back bills, how much collected, why did it happen, and what was fixed. The satellite was a deterrent. And to those who ask how this fits with budget cuts there, here is the answer: it is predictable and lawful collections to protect the core services. When agencies recover what is truly owed fairly and steadily, the pressure to cut auditors, first responders, cashiers, and collectors is reduced. We can safeguard the front line by fixing the pipeline. The proposed bill is not anti-agency, and it is not anti-ratepayer. It is pro-fairness, pro-discipline, and pro-stability. Let me close with what these delivers. For households, no more surprise lump sums, clear rights, and small predictable payments. For the agency, higher steadier collection and fewer write-offs earned through transparency and competence. The government during austerity gets smoother cash flow, less reliance on the general fund, and stronger public trust. This is how we protect the people and repair systems at the same time. We cannot keep trying to punish the ratepayers. We have deliberately been excusing government mismanagement. It has cost the government, it has cost the public, and it has cost the business. And here we are. We need to hold ourselves accountable, and we need to stop taxing the hell out of the public sector, the private sector, the businesses, and the homeowners. It is not fair. Every agency must hold itself accountable, and we must hold them accountable so that we are not going to be coming into this road again. I respectfully ask for your support for this back billing. Let us pass it when it comes. And let us make it fair, disciplined, and sustainable. Thank you.

There being no further discussion on the floor, the Chair moved down to Item No. 18, Announcements.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

There being no discussion on the floor, the Chair moved down to Adjournment, and recognized the Acting Floor Leader.

ADJOURNMENT

Acting Floor Leader Ralph Naraja Yumul: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I hereby move to adjourn subject to the call of the Chair. So move.

The motion was seconded; the Chair opened the floor for discussion. There being no discussion on the floor, the motion to adjournment was carried by voice vote. There was no “nay” vote.

The House adjourned at 2:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Brenalyn T. Santos
House Journal Clerk

APPEARANCE OF LOCAL BILLS

FIRST LEGISLATIVE DAY: 1st Legislative appearance of a local bill is on the day it is introduced.

SECOND LEGISLATIVE DAY:

THIRD LEGISLATIVE DAY:

H. L. B. NO. 24-22: To rename a portion of Lana Drive in the village of As Lito, Precinct I, to “Diego T. Benavente Drive” in honor of the Honorable Diego Tenorio Benavente, former Lieutenant Governor, Speaker of the House, and long-serving public servant of the Commonwealth. Introduced by REP(S). VINCENT R. ALDAN, ROMAN C. BENAVENTE, DIEGO V. F. CAMACHO, JOSEPH A. FLORES, RAYMOND U. PALACIOS, and EDMUND S. VILLAGOMEZ of Saipan of Saipan (for themselves) on August 29, 2025.

H. L. B. NO. 24-23: To establish the Rota Cultural Heritage and Education Tour Act, for other purposes. Introduced by REP.JOEL C. CAMACHO on behalf of REP.JULIE M. A. OGO of Rota, Precinct 7 (for herself) on August 29, 2025.

H. L. B. NO. 24-24: To establish the Rota Department of Public Works equipment rental fee, and for other purposes. . Introduced by REP.JOEL C. CAMACHO on behalf of REP.JULIE M. A. OGO of Rota, Precinct 7 (for herself) on August 29, 2025.