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As Furor Over Destruction of Williams Delight Racetrack Grows, Violet Sets up Meeting With Horsemen and Governor for Monday

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Horsemen on Saturday disrupted a Senator Kenneth Gittens food sale to protest the recent bulldozing of Williams Delight Downs, a race track created by horse racers on St. Croix. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM

The Bryan administration's vicious dismantling of Williams Delight Downs, the horse racing track that was being utilized for well over two years by local horsemen — among them a plethora of young individuals who have spent years grooming their horses — backfired spectacularly on the administration following comments by Governor Albert Bryan, who has relegated the race track as a dangerous strip of land that made him "cringe" every time he comes to St. Croix.

The sight of a backhoe bulldozing the track Thursday morning caused an emotional uprising on St. Croix, with people taking to social media to decry the action. The outpouring was so forceful that the Consortium brought up the issue to the governor during Mr. Bryan's Thursday coronavirus press briefing, asking him for his stance on the matter.

"So you're asking me why we dug up an illegal racetrack which was on a property illegally, that the person asked to have it removed, that people — especially young people — were amassing with, running animals who are not trained properly without guidelines, that could trample people or kill them. That's what you want to know why we stopped an illegal activity?" Mr. Bryan responded.

He added, "In the Virgin Islands we like to pretend a lot. And looking the other way while people conduct illegal racing and mass gather at a site where you're putting a lot of people in danger is one thing, but looking away when it's on Facebook and everywhere on social media, showing the people, showing the dangerous situation there. Looking away when the owner is giving us permission and telling us please remove these people from my property. We can't use the laws when they're convenient. We have to use the laws to enforce order in this territory."

Mr. Bryan further stated, "Every time I fly to St. Croix and I see that racetrack, I cringe, because it is such a dangerous situation. The only horse racing that's supposed to be going on is the one sanctioned by the race commission. I don't know how anyone could endorse this activity especially during this time when we know what we're going through."

The horsemen dissected the governor's words and pushed back. They said professional trainers were always on site, and that they had permission to use the property, which they had utilized for over two years incident-free. The horsemen contended that it was the government that forced the landowner to write a letter giving authority to law enforcement to destroy the track.

On Saturday, with frustration boiling over, the horsemen descended on a Senator Kenneth Gittens food sale near Plaza Extra West, bringing along their horses, in what was a powerful show of unity that resulted in a meeting being organized between the horsemen and Mr. Bryan for Monday afternoon.

The peaceful protest took place at Mr. Gittens's food sale because many of the horsemen believed it was the senator who was behind the push to destroy the racetrack. Mr. Gittens, however, defended himself and said the horsemen had it all wrong.

"Gentlemen, obviously you all have this wrong. Again, I think it was last week Monday while we were in session and I made my comments on the Senate floor. What I was doing is putting pressure on the administration to get the contract completed between the government and VIGL. We have one entity on St. Thomas that is holding up this whole project, while we have an entity here that is willing to spend 25 to 30 million dollars," Mr. Gittens said.

The senator was referring to a [lawsuit brought against VIGL and the Government of the Virgin Islands by Southland Gaming](#). In April, then-District Court Judge Curtis Gomez ruled that the government of the Virgin Islands and its partner, VIGL Operations, LLC, violated the contract clause of the United States Constitution when the Legislature, through Act 7952, granted VIGL authorization to operate slot machines in St. Thomas in contravention of an agreement the GVI had signed with Southland Gaming in 2003.

The ruling threw into question the agreement ratified by the 31st Legislature in December 2016 and signed into law by former Governor Kenneth Mapp, which promised the development of two

state-of-the-art horseracing facilities in the territory.

"What I said on the Senate floor is that while we are holding up this contract, what we're doing is forcing our sons and daughters to the bushes to race horses, fight chickens, even setup up a landfill over in the bushes. And what I'm saying is that we as a government, if we make sure that we have the facilities in place, they would not have to go there," Mr. Gittens said.

With no facility to race, and having spent thousands of dollars to groom their horses for racing, the horsemen struggled over the 4 years of no official racetrack on St. Croix to keep their sport — and for some their livelihood — alive. They settled on the property in Williams Delight, where they said they had gotten permission to conduct the races. Overtime, Williams Delight Downs became one of the go-to spots for entertainment on Sundays.

The horsemen, speaking live on the Consortium Thursday night, said the races had helped in deterring crime and even brought warring factions together — in a feat many had thought impossible. On Saturday, some said they cried for days, stunned by the savage action of the government to dismantle the racetrack with a backhoe, rendering the grounds unusable.

They vented loudly but peacefully, asking what's next.

The V.I.P.D. issued a statement that sought to explain the police force's decision to bulldoze the track. It said the department had taken a number of actions to stop the racing to no avail. "Usually, after officers depart the area, the attendees would return to the path in continuance of racing their horses, which included illegal betting. Over a period of time, upon being notified of the unlawful events, VIPD placed immobilized vehicles on the path in attempt to curtail the races. Those vehicles were removed from the path by attendees in furtherance of the races," read the statement.

Senator Kurt Violet moved swiftly on Saturday to find a solution. He said he called Governor Bryan to inform him of the anger that had fermented as a result of the race track's destruction, and he urged the governor to meet with the horsemen.

Speaking to one of the leaders of the horsemen, Mr. Violet said, "He agreed to a meeting at three o'clock," on Monday.

Another protest is scheduled for 11:00 a.m. today at the Randall "Doc" James Racetrack site on the Airport Road.