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Bryan Pushes for Cruise Ship Casino Bill to Boost St. Croix Economy

New legislation aims to increase cruise visits, extend passenger stays, and enhance local business opportunities

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A Royal Caribbean cruise ship at the Frederiksted Pier. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

In a bid to enhance St. Croix's position as a top cruise destination and stimulate economic growth, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. has introduced a legislative proposal that would allow cruise ships docked at the island to keep their onboard casinos open while in port. This initiative is aimed solely at cruise ship passengers and is intended to attract more cruise lines to the island, increasing visitor spending and supporting local businesses.

"Passing this legislation isn't just about enabling casino operations. It's about making St. Croix a standout stop on Caribbean cruise itineraries," said Governor Bryan during a recent briefing at Government House earlier this week. He highlighted that around 90 percent of cruise passengers typically disembark to explore the islands, frequenting local shops and restaurants. "Allowing the casinos to remain open while in port gives cruise passengers more options, and in turn, creates greater opportunities for our businesses and residents," Bryan added.

The legislation is a key component of administration's broader strategy to revitalize tourism on St. Croix, which has seen an uptick in cruise visits over the past three years. Currently, cruise ships remain in Frederiksted for about 10 hours, which limits passengers' ability to fully explore the island due to early departures. Governor Bryan emphasized that this measure would extend the time visitors spend on the island, thereby increasing the economic benefit to local businesses.

"Our strategy is simple: extend the day, extend the stay, increase the spend," said Bryan. "We need to give visitors more time to enjoy St. Croix—whether it's taking a second tour, shopping in Frederiksted, or savoring our rich culture. This legislation offers cruise lines an economic incentive by saving on fuel costs, while keeping passengers engaged and spending in our towns."

The proposed legislation draws from a similar law that has been in place in the St. Thomas and St. John districts for over 20 years, which has proven successful in attracting cruise ships and boosting the local economy. Governor Bryan is optimistic that expanding this benefit to St. Croix will have a similarly positive impact, driving more passenger traffic to the island and supporting local businesses.

"Frederiksted has been a focal point of our administration's downtown revitalization efforts," Bryan noted. "Initiatives like the 'Derelict & Abandoned Buildings Legislation,' the Frederiksted Jazz series, and the waterfront redevelopment are all designed to enhance the visitor experience. This legislation is the next step in our efforts to make St. Croix an even more appealing destination."

As part of a broader initiative to rejuvenate town centers across the Virgin Islands, the governor announced that his administration has allocated \$1 million for revitalizing downtown areas in Charlotte Amalie, Christiansted, and Frederiksted. These funds will be distributed to local organizations, such as the St. Thomas Chamber of Commerce, Our Town Frederiksted, and the Christiansted Retail & Restaurant Association, to support after-hours events that drive economic activity and attract both residents and visitors.

"The economic viability of our towns has always been a key priority of this administration," Mr. Bryan emphasized. "We've worked closely with our cruise partners to triple the number of passengers visiting our islands, and we're confident that this casino legislation will further strengthen our position in the cruise market."

Governor Bryan urged the 35th Legislature to act swiftly on the bill, which he believes is critical to unlocking St. Croix's potential. In addition to the casino legislation, the governor pointed to other long-term strategies aimed at improving the visitor experience, including efforts to encourage cruise lines to provision locally, reduce emissions through shore power at the port, and participate in local events such as the "Harbor Night" festivals. These nighttime events, which would be revived with a \$250,000 grant to Our Town Frederiksted, are intended to offer cruise passengers and locals a lively and vibrant Frederiksted experience.

"We're working to create a vibrant and bustling Frederiksted, where both tourists and locals can enjoy events and activities day and night," Bryan said. "This legislation is one critical piece of the

puzzle that will extend the stay of our cruise passengers, increase cruise ship calls, and provide a significant boost to our economy."

The governor concluded by thanking the 35th Legislature for their attention to the matter and encouraged the swift passage of the casino bill. "Together, we can move St. Croix forward, strengthen our tourism product, and build a brighter future for the entire Virgin Islands."

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