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Despite Gov't Deals and No Obstacles, St. Croix Racetrack Remains Unbuilt as VIGL Pursues Antigua Project

VIGL pursuing horse racetrack deal in Antigua while St. Croix Racetrack remains almost a decade delayed despite no impediments and countless missed deadlines

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Land owned by VIPA and leased to the GVI, which in turn has leased it to VIGL for development of the Randall “Doc” James Race Track. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

Despite rosy projections from VIGL representatives that training activity on the Randall “Doc” James Racetrack could be seen by as early as next spring, lawmakers on Tuesday expressed

unease over the lack of firm timelines and the company's less-than-stellar track record on the project thus far.?

"We have not set a groundbreaking date yet," said VIGL Operations Managing Partner Andrew Dubuque, in response to a question from Senator Carla Joseph. "I don't have the completion date for you, Senator Johnson," he said seconds later in response to a query from that lawmaker. Nevertheless, "current site work, starting with barn renovation will occur in the next 10 days this September, along with rail repair and eventually track surface restoration," Mr. Dubuque assured lawmakers.

In his testimony, which was [compelled under subpoena](#), Mr. Dubuque disclosed that "we've spent nearly \$11 million" on the project thus far, "\$2 million of which has been spent in the past two years on architecture and engineering." He anticipates a further "\$20 million in expenditures" to complete the work. Mr. Dubuque expressed confidence that Atlantic Caribbean Consulting, acting as owner's representative on the project, will be able to manage the process to a successful, timely completion. Committee chair Senator Angel Bolques Jr. seemed surprised to learn of the amount spent, stating, "I really don't see any visible progress." He requested that a breakdown of the expenditures be submitted to the committee for scrutiny.

Aside from Mr. Dubuque's assurances, other testifiers at the Senate Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports, and Parks were much more critical. As it stands, VIGL is in material breach of its agreement with the government, said Calvert White, commissioner of the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation. "After multiple emails, notices and attempts to address to advance this project, on May 28 2024 legal counsel for the governor of the Virgin Islands issued a formal notice to cure to Mr. Andrew Dubuque of VIGL indicating that VIGL is in default of the executed franchise agreement as amended," he told lawmakers during his prepared testimony.?

Among the key breaches listed by Mr. White include VIGL's continued failure to post an \$8 million performance bond, which was supposed to have been in place by October 2023. The initial September 2023 deadline for breaking ground was extended to May 2024, which also came and went with no movement on the project despite the Casino Control Commission license which VIGL insisted was required prior to construction having been issued on April 30. All other deadlines for completion percentages, permits, etc have fallen by the wayside, the commissioner noted.

Mr. White said that at the end of June, a request was sent by the governor's legal counsel to the chairs of the St. Croix and Virgin Islands Horse Racing Commissions "to determine the appropriate sanctions for VIGL's failure to cure the defaults." That hearing has yet to occur, despite a second request being sent on September 13. "There is absolutely nothing on the GVI side stopping this project from moving forward," Mr. White told lawmakers.?

Lawrence Richards, the representative from Atlantic Caribbean Consulting, explained that VIGL has all the necessary permits to begin site construction, with permitting for future buildings like the grandstands being "pulled as we go through the process."

Meanwhile, Elroy Bates Jr., resident of the Flamboyant Park Horsemen Association, suggested that VIGL should consider whether they are actually able to bring this project to completion. "If VIGL is not going to start the buildout of the racetrack, they should give it up and let us find another entity to run it. It's been too long now, and they have everything they requested." He bemoaned what he called overly-generous assistance to the company from government coffers, specifically describing "a bill brought forward by Senator Javan James that's [giving \\$5 million to](#)

[VIGL](#) after three months of construction.” Mr. Bates also contended that “Governor Bryan agreed to give VIGL back 40% of the taxes collected from the racino for purses, which is ludicrous.”

Despite these concessions, “VIGL has had the Randall “Doc” James Racetrack going at eight years now without hosting any horse races, and cannot answer as to when they will be horse racing again in St. Croix,” he lamented. By the end of Friday’s hearing, Mr. Bates said he hoped to have dates for when construction would begin and when races are projected to commence. Those hopes remained unfulfilled.

Senator Marvin Blyden spent some time trying to figure out why VIGL had been moving so slowly, especially compared to Southland Gaming, which has already operationalized the Clinton E. Phipps racetrack on St. Thomas. “I don't think financial challenges is really the answer,” Mr. Dubuque responded. “I think the answer is we need to make the project economically viable, meaning that cost – construction costs – have gone up tremendously in the past two years, tremendously.” When pressed to clarify what he meant by that, Mr. Dubuque suggested that rather than affecting the racing operations, VIGL would “probably change some of the scope or the value engineering of the racino.”

Several lawmakers tried in vain to get Mr. Dubuque to commit to some kind of timeline for the construction of other key parts of the project. Senator Novelle Francis wondered whether VIGL’s attention was being diverted to business opportunities elsewhere, instead of being focused on building the track on St. Croix. “Do you have an interest in a horse race track outside of the territory?” Sen. Francis asked bluntly. “As of today, we do not,” Mr. Dubuque responded.

The lawmaker sharpened his inquiry, asking about VIGL’s involvement with the Antigua Turf Club. “The company looks at a variety of mergers and acquisitions and expansion opportunities,” Mr. Dubuque answered. When pressed further, he added, “I don’t think I’m at liberty to say what confidential agreements we might have with other businesses throughout the world.”?

At that point, Sen. Bolques interjected to play a video which purported to show work being done on the Cassada Gardens Racetrack in Antigua. Listed on the video are the names of companies assumed to be involved in the development, including Caravelle Group Antigua Inc. “Let me state for the record that I have family in Antigua, so I have nothing against Antigua,” Sen. Francis said following the video. “My question is, what is the level of priority?” The lawmaker wondered how VIGL was managing its affairs when it came to ensuring that the Randall “Doc” James Racetrack is completed. “You don’t have money to build one here in St. Croix but we’re building one in Antigua,” Sen. Francis retorted.

Mr. Dubuque evinced surprise at the video. “First and foremost, I’ve never seen that video in my life. First time I’ve ever seen that,” he declared, before assuring lawmakers that “we do not have any definitive agreements with anybody on the island of Antigua.”?

Having received that response under oath, Sen. Francis seemed happy to move on. However, before yielding the floor at the end of his questioning, he returned to the subject. “I just once again want to confirm on the record that the Caravelle Group, that in fact you’re not aware of a \$5 million investment, or escrow, with the Antigua Turf Club for racetrack redevelopment in Antigua.”

“Our company is financially sound, and we have the resources to complete multiple expansion opportunities at the same time. However, as of today, we do not have any definitive, any definitive agreements with any entity on the island of Antigua,” Mr. Dubuque responded.?

At that, Sen. Bolques asked the clerk to read into the record what he called a “transcript”, which seemed to outline a decision from the Government of Antigua’s cabinet of Ministers, granting a 50-year lease to the Antigua Turf Club, which includes permission for ATC to “sublet a portion of the leased land to the Caravelle Group Antigua Inc. for the construction of the casino and gaming facility.” The document also described permission from the Antiguan Government for Caravelle to be granted a casino license, and the necessary waivers and concessions for Caravelle to begin resurfacing the race course. Caravelle was seemingly required to place \$5 million EC into an escrow account as a condition of the agreement.?

Asked for a response to this disclosure and being reminded that he was under oath, Mr. Dubuque yet again insisted that “we don’t have any definitive agreements with anybody on the island of Antigua.” However, he defended the right of the company to pursue the business opportunities it deemed attractive. “I’m not denying the fact that we are looking at the island of Antigua...I think it’d be pretty great if there were under one group, there’d be multiple Caribbean islands that we could establish a circuit,” he declared. “I would think that, frankly, this committee would want me to do this.” Mr. Dubuque stressed, however, that anything the company does outside of the territory “will not and does not impede any activities that are happening here on St. Croix.”

Sen. Bolques did not seem mollified by that assurance. “No one is telling you how to run your company. What we’re really looking at is the fact that it’s been seven years [and] we have seen absolutely no movement on the Doc James Racetrack....the people of St. Croix have had enough.”

Sen. Francis underscored the point. “We don’t want nobody to come and play us,” he declared. “I’m very emotional and serious about that, because we don’t want to be used. We don’t take that lightly.”