

St. Thomas Racetrack Set for Year-End Completion; St. Croix Still Stuck in the Gate

As Southland Gaming speeds toward finishing the Clinton E. Phipps Racetrack, St. Croix's horse racing facility faces continued delays with no construction start day in sight

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The completion of the Clinton E Phipps Racetrack on St. Thomas is significantly ahead of schedule. That's according to Shaine Gaspard, executive vice president of Southland Gaming who testified before the Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports, and Parks on Friday morning.?

"Originally we had 42 months to be substantially complete with the project, and then 24 months to be 50% complete," he told lawmakers. However, Mr. Gaspard is confident that "we're going to be 100% complete before the halfway mark, and that's going to be either at the end of this year or at the beginning of the next year."

The situation on sister island St. Croix is [starkly different](#), however, with VIGL not committing to a start date for construction of the Randall “Doc” James Racetrack, while appearing to pursue similar ambitions on the island of Antigua.

According to Dept. of Sports, Parks and Recreation Commissioner Calvert White, DSPR is working closely with Southland Gaming to revitalize the racetrack. He reminded legislators that “with the track out of operation for over seven years and lacking infrastructure, we essentially started from scratch.” Now, the facility previously rendered unusable by Hurricanes Irma and Maria is 80% complete, Mr. White told lawmakers. Grandstands, accessory rooms, vet quarters, and jockey locker rooms are “ready for their final certificate of occupancy,” he reported.?

Meanwhile, the construction of barns and space for equipment storage is 90% completed. Secondary barns are 60% completed. The remaining tasks, testified Mr. White, include completing perimeter fencing, the main barn, and the parking lot. “This project is scheduled for completion by the end of the year, although I am hopeful it will be finished sooner,” the commissioner said.

“I won't say we've been moving at lightning speed. We've been moving at a quick speed, but a cautious speed to make sure we do everything right and with quality,” Mr. Gaspard affirmed. He lauded the ease of the permitting process associated with the construction process, crediting “great communication” and “transparency.” Senator Marvin Blyden, buoyed by the news, concurred that “the guys have been there day and night, working to assure that they completed that task.”

?With steady progress on outstanding work, DSPR has already [hosted two races](#) at the track using funds from the Horse Racing Improvement Fund. A third race, scheduled for September 2nd, was postponed after rains associated with then-Tropical Storm Ernesto damaged the running surface. A ghut running through the track poses serious issues during heavy rains, but Mr. White said his department is “working with [the Department of] Public Works to address that concern...If we don't fix the ghut problem, it's going to wash the sand away again.”?

Horse racing enthusiasts can expect three more horse races at the Clinton E Phipps Racetrack by the end of 2024, one per month. DSPR acted as the promoter for both the May and June races. It's a venture described as both expensive and time-consuming. “It is not my intention to continue being the promoter,” said Mr. White, explaining that the task is “beyond the DSPR's current capacity.” However, they will continue to act in that role until such time that a new promoter is identified. “It needs to be someone full-time who can take on this task,” he said, referencing the magnitude of the preparatory work involved.?

DSPR intends to host a public meeting in the coming days to allow interested residents to vote for one of two temporary promoters already identified: Southland Gaming, or the St. Thomas/St. John Horse Racing Association. The department will simultaneously work with the St. Thomas/St. John Horse Racing Commission to develop “a comprehensive plan to solicit a permanent promoter.”