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Bryan Signs Bill to Raise Tobacco Age, Protect Minors, and Boost Renewable Energy

With recent approvals, the Virgin Islands raises the tobacco purchase age to 21, expands child protections, and supports renewable energy infrastructure

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Governor Albert Bryan, Jr. By. GOV'T HOUSE

Government House announced Tuesday that Governor Albert Bryan Jr. signed several bills passed by the 35th Legislature, among them measures related to public safety, healthcare, economic growth, and cultural preservation.

In a statement, Mr. Bryan highlighted the lasting impact of the approved measures, noting, "The measures approved will have a lasting impact on our community, expanding protections for our

children, enhancing public health initiatives, supporting economic innovation, and modernizing critical infrastructure."

Among the approved bills was Bill No. 35-0031, known as the Child Victims' and Child Witnesses' Rights Act, which strengthens legal protections for minors involved in court cases. Another critical health-focused bill, Bill No. 35-0289, raises the minimum age for purchasing tobacco to 21, aligning local regulations with national public health standards.

Governor Bryan also approved Bill No. 35-0257, which introduces an annual U.S. Virgin Islands Beer, Wine, and Spirits Festival, aimed at promoting tourism and celebrating local artisans. This legislation additionally funds crucial electrical infrastructure repairs in underserved parts of St. Croix, supports EMS training, and broadens educational resources for students and families. Moreover, Bill No. 35-0283 amends the Virgin Islands Cannabis Use Act, paving the way for further business opportunities and regulatory advancements within the cannabis industry.

The governor signed Bill No. 35-0285, bestowing the Official Key to the Virgin Islands upon musician Bryan "Benny-Demus" Boulai in recognition of his contributions to local culture and the music industry. In addition, Bill No. 35-0286 formally designates the St. Thomas/St. John Superior Courthouse in honor of Judge Verne A. Hodge, acknowledging his decades of service to the Virgin Islands legal system.

Two critical infrastructure bills, Bill Nos. 35-0300 and 35-0320, authorize lease agreements with Advance Power, LLC, to develop microgrid projects with wind turbines on St. Thomas and St. Croix.

Additionally, Bill No. 35-0340 extends the state of emergency in response to the Virgin Islands' ongoing power crisis, enabling the government to maintain stability in energy services until December 20, 2024.

Mr. Bryan approved Bill No. 35-0390, establishing the Money Transmission Revolving Fund to improve oversight of money transmission services. He recommended specific changes, such as assigning fee collection to the Office of the Lieutenant Governor and removing the proposed income tax credit, to ensure better fiscal management.

Governor Bryan authorized various land leases and conveyances, including Bill No. 35-0374, which transfers Parcel No. 201 Submarine Base to the Virgin Islands Public Broadcasting System, supporting public media. Another lease, Bill No. 35-0383, allocates land to the St. Croix Science Teachers' Association to advance educational initiatives and community growth.

The governor issued a careful veto on Bill No. 35-0388, which sought to amend felony prosecution procedures. He argued that the proposed timeline would place undue pressure on the judicial system, advocating instead for a more coordinated approach that includes input from prosecutorial offices to ensure smooth implementation without disrupting the courts.

The territory's leader acknowledged the Legislature's recent overrides of several acts, including Act Nos. 8919, 8920, 8921, and 8922.