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Bryan Seeks Changes to H1B Visa Law as USVI Braces for Immigration Policy Shifts Under Trump Administration

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. aims to amend H1B visa restrictions to address manpower shortages in the USVI, while preparing for potential impacts of mass deportation policies and immigration changes expected under a second Trump administration

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New Washington lobbyists hired by the Government of the Virgin Islands to help navigate a second Trump term will be ready to present their gameplan to members of the Public Finance Authority in February.

“You will hear presentations from the lobbyists in terms of where they see our efforts going to produce the best results with this new administration,” said PFA Director of Finance & Administration Nathan Simmonds during a discussion at last week's board meeting. The topic arose when board secretary Keith O'Neale asked whether the GVI would be “changing the engagement of our lobbyists and attorneys moving forward based on the new political climate.”

According to Governor Albert Bryan Jr., main lobbyist Squire Patton Boggs “has always been Republican.” He reminded board members that he began his governorship under President Trump, “so we always had a Republican bias in our representation.” Governor Bryan noted that a new lobbyist on board “is already giving us access to some pretty powerful people in the administration,” but admitted that “he's a little pricey.” Negotiations are ongoing to “bring him down to a reasonable sum,” Governor Bryan told members of the PFA. Despite the hefty fees, “he is worth the money,” albeit “not the dollar he wants,” the governor continued.

Governor Bryan spoke about his recent trip to Washington D.C. where he met with, among other people, Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett. “We went through all of the issues that we think remain pertinent on the Hill,” he noted. “I'm feeling a little positive now. However, we'll know after January 20th when he's sworn in what exactly to expect.”

The incoming administration's stated goal of mass deportations was also a topic of concern, with board members wanting to know how that could possibly affect the Virgin Islands.

“The most foreboding thing is they don't really have any place to put people,” Governor Bryan responded. “They don't have the capacity – all the jails, all the detention centers are already overcrowded with people. So it's not just a matter of rounding people up.”

“It will have an effect on us,” Governor Bryan predicted of Trump's mass deportation policy. He noted that the Virgin Islands would be trying to change the requirements for the issuance of H1B work visas. “Sometime in the 70s, we...changed that we can't bring in H1B workers – only for entertainment and sports we could bring workers in. So we're trying to get that changed.” The governor disclosed that “we are already in contact with contractors in Central America – more specifically Colombia – for workers. But we gotta get that little piece changed.”

The government does not know the numbers of undocumented immigrants in the Virgin Islands, Governor Bryan said, noting that many are just passing through on their way to the mainland. However, he acknowledged that “we have a lot of undocumented Haitian, Colombian, Venezuelan, and Dominican Republic” nationals in the territory. The expected new policy “will have some impact,” said the governor, “but I think they know how to escape that.” He acknowledged that the territory's stance on allowing undocumented migrants a certain amount of leeway to ease their stay in the territory is at odds with the expected approach of the incoming administration.

The Trump administration's stance on environmental regulations was also brought up, in terms of how that may impact the work being done to restart the refinery on St. Croix's south shore.

“There's still a lot of mechanical things that will have to happen for the refinery to open up,” Governor Bryan said, noting that he met with Environmental Protection Agency officials two weeks ago. “Things are going to start a little bit for the refinery opening up but it's still a lot of legal hurdles to vote on.” Nonetheless, “there's a lot of interest in that refinery platform,” in Washington, Governor Bryan noted, “so that's good.”