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Governor Bryan Signs 27 Bills, Vetoes Two, Including \$20 Million Sea View Renovation Bill

The governor vetoed Bill No. 35-0108, advocating funds be redirected to replace the Eldra Schulerbrandt Long Term Care Facility and the Queen Louise Home for the Aged instead of renovating Sea View, while approving 27 other measures

Government / **Published On January 02, 2025 03:30 PM /**

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Queen Louise Home for the Aged in St. Thomas

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. has completed his review of 29 bills passed by the 35th Legislature during its December 18 session, signing 27 into law while vetoing two. In a letter to Senate President Novelle E. Francis Jr., Governor Bryan outlined the rationale for his decisions, stressing fiscal responsibility and strategic priorities for the territory.

Among the legislation approved by Governor Bryan is Bill No. 35-0431, which adopts the 2024 Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan submitted by the Department of Planning and Natural Resources.

Other significant measures include:

- Bill No. 35-0179: Strengthens enforcement tools against illegal gambling and violations of the Virgin Islands Lottery.
- Bill No. 35-0224: Expands access to behavioral health services, including mobile crisis intervention and the 9-8-8 telecommunication system.
- Bill No. 35-0254: Establishes the Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology Interstate Compact.
- Bill No. 35-0295: Creates the Virgin Islands Prescription Drug Monitoring Program.
- Bill No. 35-0336: Establishes the Office of Conflict Counsel to provide legal representation for indigent defendants, granting personal immunity to counsel and appropriating funds for its creation.

Zoning bills 35-0401, 35-0404, 35-0406, and 35-0407 were also signed, facilitating development projects across the territory.

Governor Bryan vetoed Bill No. 35-0108, which proposed appropriating \$20 million from the Jeffrey E. Epstein settlement to renovate the Sea View nursing home. The governor explained that funds would be better allocated to replace the Eldra Schulerbrandt Long Term Care Facility and the Queen Louise Home for the Aged, which would have a greater immediate impact.

In a pointed comment directed at Senator Bill DeGraff, who sponsored the bill, Governor Bryan stated, “DeGraff doesn’t seem to be paying attention. The legislature has been told repeatedly, we have too many capital projects. Why do we keep funding more with cash that is sitting rather than paying the vendors or retro payments we owe? The letter even says that it’s a mental facility that we need. That is unfunded. Sea View will be multi-use and we wouldn’t be able to comply with appropriation if we used it for mental illness.”

Additionally, Bill No. 35-0399, mandating a minimum bail for domestic violence cases, was rejected. The governor expressed concerns that the measure would disproportionately penalize those living in poverty while removing judicial discretion to evaluate individual cases. “This measure does not address the root causes of violence but rather inflicts a penalty on poverty,” he stated.

Governor Bryan exercised line-item vetoes on sections of Bill No. 35-0428, which appropriated \$2.93 million from the Indirect Cost Fund for fiscal year 2025. The governor noted that the proposed appropriation for fiscal year 2023 services was untimely and pointed to the need for an actuarial study to assess its impact on the Government Employees’ Retirement System (GERS).

Governor Bryan commended the Legislature for adopting Bill No. 35-0430, which honors the St. Croix Alumnae Chapter of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., for its 50 years of community contributions.

In his letter to Senate leadership, Governor Bryan reiterated concerns about the proliferation of unfunded capital projects, urging lawmakers to prioritize existing obligations such as vendor payments and retroactive employee pay. Referring to recent appropriations, he stated, “Why do we keep funding more with cash that is sitting rather than paying the vendors or retro payments we owe?”

The governor emphasized that Sea View is designed as a multi-use facility and urged a more targeted approach to addressing the territory's need for mental health facilities.

Governor Bryan also recognized the confirmation of Mario Brooks as commissioner of the V.I. Police Department, commending his leadership and commitment to public safety.

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