

BVI Calls for Dialogue as USVI Weighs Tariffs in Growing Trade Dispute; Gittens Responds to Bryan

BVI Premier Natalio Wheatley urges dialogue as USVI considers tariffs, citing economic imbalance—USVI charters generate up to \$100M but contribute only a few hundred dollars per vessel to the BVI. Governor Bryan weighs federal support as tensions rise.

Business / **Published On February 28, 2025 07:33 PM /**

Ernice Gilbert **February 28, 2025**

Image not found or type unknown



BVI Premier Natalio Wheatley.

The British Virgin Islands government has responded to rising tensions with the U.S. Virgin Islands over proposed fee increases on USVI charter yachts, urging dialogue instead of retaliatory trade measures. Premier Natalio Wheatley spoke of the economic interdependence between the territories and the need for a fairer distribution of economic benefits from marine tourism.

Speaking at a press event on Friday, Premier Wheatley acknowledged that the BVI and USVI have long depended on each other's economies, particularly in tourism and marine trade. He pointed out that while USVI charter companies generate nearly \$100 million annually, their financial contributions to the BVI remain minimal. A single USVI charter company can generate between \$50,000 and \$100,000 per week, yet the annual commercial vessel license fee paid to the BVI is just a few hundred dollars per vessel, he said.

The BVI government, Wheatley stated, has taken steps to modernize legislation governing charter operations. After extensive consultations with stakeholders from 2002 to 2004, the BVI introduced 22 legislative amendments to update licensing and fee structures. Wheatley revealed that he personally shared these updates with Governor Albert Bryan Jr. during bilateral meetings and at an Inter-Virgin Islands Council (IVIC) meeting.

Following the first reading of the proposed legislation in the House of Assembly, Wheatley expressed surprise at Governor Bryan's request for an emergency session of the USVI Senate to consider imposing a 25% tariff on imported goods from the BVI and a transit fee for travelers moving between the territories. The BVI leader expressed disappointment that trade discussions had escalated in this manner, considering Governor Bryan a longtime ally of the BVI.

"Governor Bryan has been a true friend of the BVI during our darkest hours," Wheatley said. "However, on the issue of our territories' economic relations, I believe dialogue would have been the best course of action rather than any attempt to pressure us through trade measures." He invited Governor Bryan to Tortola for direct discussions, aiming to establish a mutually beneficial agreement.

Gittens Defends His Actions Amid Governor Bryan's Criticism

While the BVI seeks diplomatic solutions, Senator Kenneth Gittens has defended his actions following criticism from Governor Bryan, who accused him of weakening the territory's negotiating stance.

Gittens explained that ahead of an emergency meeting with Governor Bryan, he had sought legal clarification from the Legislature's Office of Legal Counsel regarding the USVI's authority to impose tariffs. The legal opinion concluded that only the U.S. President has such authority. The revelation of this legal opinion, which was made public, undermined the USVI's bargaining power, Bryan argued, prompting the abrupt cancellation of the meeting.

Senator Gittens, however, rejected this assertion. "Questioning my motives is, at best, highly irresponsible," he said, adding that his priority remains retaining affordable access to the BVI for the USVI's marine industry. He stated that the legal opinion was public information and that sharing it with his colleagues was a responsible course of action to ensure that negotiations remained within the bounds of the law.

"There is still much to discuss regarding how we will address this matter," Gittens added. "It is disingenuous to say that I undermined negotiations when I was simply working to ensure that my colleagues and I were well-informed."

Governor Bryan's Next Steps and White House Considerations

Governor Bryan, who remains committed to retaliatory action against the BVI if necessary, has not ruled out seeking assistance from the Trump administration. He revealed that he has already

shared his position with the Deputy Chief of Staff at the White House, who assured him that federal support could be available if needed.

“We are moving forward with our own strategy, and if we need help from the White House, I’ll get it from there too,” Bryan said. “I don’t think it will come to that, but I have shared my position, and the Deputy Chief of Staff told me, ‘If you need my help, just let me know.’”

Governor Bryan said his goal is to establish a fair and sustainable charter industry in the greater Virgin Islands region. While his administration continues to develop a response to the BVI’s fee increases, he acknowledged that BVI officials have signaled willingness to negotiate.

Upcoming Negotiations and Potential Resolutions

Governor Bryan announced that the postponed emergency meeting with USVI lawmakers has been rescheduled for next week. Meanwhile, the BVI’s invitation for direct discussions remains open. Both sides acknowledge the importance of a strong economic relationship, but the path forward remains uncertain as tensions persist over trade regulations and financial contributions from marine tourism.