

“We Got Enough Liquor,” Senator Frederick Says as He Vows Action on Bar Operating on Farmland

Frederick said use variances aren’t meant to mix alcohol with agriculture. He pledged to “get hold of this before it gets out of hand,” following VIDA’s confirmation of the bar’s existence on leased farmland.

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Senator Hubert Frederick. By. THE VIRGIN ISLANDS LEGISLATURE

During Wednesday's meeting of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, lawmakers and Department of Agriculture leadership discussed the existence of a bar currently being operated on land designated for agricultural use.

“That’s a concern of the community. It’s a concern of ours as well,” admitted Agriculture Commissioner Louis Petersen, who said he was not “initially open” to such an enterprise. Nonetheless, he told lawmakers that VIDA is “taking a second look at how to innovate and modernize farming,” including the incorporation of “farm-to-table” initiatives. “It doesn’t mean it has to be a bar. I still have a concern with outright restaurants on farmland,” Mr. Petersen clarified. VIDA, he says, is currently in the process of developing protocols that will regulate what is allowed on designated farmland.

He reminded lawmakers that the mixological endeavor was only possible because a use variance requested by the proprietor was approved by the Legislature. “That particular farmer has the right to do what that farmer is doing,” he stated.

The details provided by Mr. Petersen baffled Senator Alma Francis Heyliger. “Are you saying to us that a farmer came to [the Department of] Agriculture, requested a parcel of land to farm, to advance agriculture in the territory, took that lease, got a variance, and is now running a bar and not farming?”

Mr. Petersen assured the lawmaker that farming is also taking place on the land. He also disclosed that when he conducted a site visit, “the farmer had an interest in developing a restaurant-type bar operation on his particular site” and approached VIDA, who was “not in concurrence with the request.”

Senator Franklin Johnson was the next to chime in, stating that he was familiar with the unnamed operation in question. “That’s not the only farm that’s doing that,” he claimed. “He was supposed to be taking his produce and doing juicing and smoothies and stuff like that...It is happening but there’s a little addition to the juice.”

“I know the intent was for them to use their produce or the products to do a farm-to-table type restaurant. I think that’s what the intent was; how it started out,” Johnson continued. Given the apparent pivot in offerings, the lawmaker called on VIDA to enforce the original ask when it comes to any given use variance for agricultural land.

Senator Hubert Frederick, the committee’s chair, was less forgiving. “When we give folks variances, it’s usually for specific purposes, not to be smart and come up with a way to infuse something like a juicing operation with bourbon, rum...vodka,” he complained. “It’s making a mockery of our intent, the spirit of our laws, especially for agriculture.”

“I’m going to make sure that we really get a hold of this before it gets out of hand,” promised Frederick, who owns Island Insurance Agency and has been an agent and broker. “We got enough liquor anyway.”

The lawmaker was also concerned about increased liability risks. Minutes earlier, Commissioner Petersen had announced that three local insurance agencies were now agreeing to provide the necessary coverage for farmers wishing to execute lease agreements with VIDA. “We have three now, as opposed to [zero several months ago](#),” Mr. Petersen buoyantly informed lawmakers

“If you want to see that disappear, let them continue to get smart with stuff like this,” Senator Frederick warned. “The premiums will definitely be higher now that you have alcohol on a farm...What if someone leaves that place intoxicated and hurts someone [or] kills someone?... I understand they need to make some extra money, yes, but we need to be careful with this stuff.”