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Senators Call for Return to Manual Lottery Draws as V.I. Lottery Defends Digital System

Lawmakers pressed V.I. Lottery to restore public confidence by reintroducing manual draw methods, but Director Raymond Williams defended the current virtual system, calling it an industry standard that cuts costs and safeguards against fraud.

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Opinions on the integrity of lottery draws in the U.S. Virgin Islands differed on Friday, as some legislators insisted that a return to manual methods was the only way to gain “public trust in this system.” That was the assertion of Senator Kenneth Gittens when the V.I. Lottery appeared before the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection on Friday.

For years, V.I. Lottery has used random number generator technology for lottery draws. According to Executive Director Raymond Williams, it is the “industry best standard.” Used globally, Mr. Williams insisted that the virtual draw produces “savings in time, material, labor” when compared to the manual “ball drop” process. “We can do the drawing anywhere, as opposed to the manual draw process,” he told Senator Novelle Francis, who shared similar sentiments as his Senate colleague.

“I think it would be good if you could do some virtual drawings. I think it will help to bring some credibility to the system,” Francis suggested.

Senator Gittens was less guarded. “There's a lack of visual transparency,” he informed Mr. Williams. “Why did the lottery system move away from the traditional ball drop drawings that players can actually physically witness?” he asked. They did so, Mr. Williams, said, because “there's potential for theft because it's a human factor.” The lawmaker was not convinced. “We have to look at the security mechanisms for either one,” Senator Gittens rebutted.

He remained notably displeased that V.I. Lottery is “hard bent on not returning to the ball drop process.” He called for a “plan to restore the public's confidence in the continued operation of our lottery system.”

“Bottom line is our revenues, our sales, are consistent. It is not falling off,” said Mr. Williams, his evidence for the strength of public trust in the draws. “If I saw ourselves falling off by a ridiculous number, then we have to look at other things.”

“Numbers don't lie,” he later said. “What you're representing is that people are not playing. Our numbers stay consistent. Our revenues stay consistent.”

Notwithstanding that reasoning, Gittens maintained a preference for traditional lottery draw methods. “I'm not asking for the air mix technology...but even looking at the old traditional hand spinning basket that they used to use and televise it,” he suggested. “As dinosaur as it might sound, again, we have to get this integrity and the comfort level of players to come back.” Plans to televise the draw, said Mr. Williams, have been in discussion.

Senator Gittens urged “transparency” and encouraged V.I. Lottery to “engage community feedback and bring the integrity of this game back to the level it needs to be.”

Mr. Williams, however, sharply countered the lawmaker's basket draw suggestion, describing it as “preposterous.” “I can't put balls in a bag or a basket or something and still do an algorithm. That is illegal,” he continued.

The V.I. Lottery head argued that public education was the way forward, not reverting to outdated procedures. “In helping us to promote the integrity of the program, you got to start telling people that the lottery is following best practices, not what Joe Blow and Mary Sue think should happen,” Mr. Williams warned.