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Senators Question Why Government Is Paying Phipps Race Day Costs Despite Southland Role, as DSPR Seeks \$10.2M Budget

With senators questioning why DSPR is covering race day costs at Phipps when Southland Gaming is the promoter, officials also reported on delays at Paul E. Joseph Stadium and called for \$1 million to overhaul lighting at Emile Griffith Ball Park.

Government / **Published On July 02, 2025 07:50 AM /**

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The Clinton E. Phipps racetrack in St. Thomas. By. SOUTHLAND GAMING.

Despite not being responsible for hosting races at the Clinton E. Phipps Race Track and not collecting any proceeds from the races, the Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation has been footing the bill for expenses at the track.

That observation was made by Senator Kurt Violet when DSPR appeared before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance to present and justify its FY2026 budget request on Tuesday.

Currently, Southland Gaming is the promoter of races at the track, which reopened in time for the 2024 St. Thomas Carnival season. According to DSPR Acting Commissioner Vincent Roberts, of the races held at the track to date, the department has only been responsible for “the one in December.” He could not, however, tell Mr. Violet if all receipts from that race day were collected.

“I think former commissioner White was responsible for collecting. Have any moneys been deposited in any account for Sports, Park and Recreation?” Violet asked. The response from Carol Peters, director of business and finance, was “no, not to my knowledge.”

“But Sports Parks, and Recreation, from the casino account, have been making payments for work done at the racetrack,” Mr. Violet noted. “Why are we paying for expenses at Phipps racetrack if Southland Gaming is the promoter and responsible for those expenses on that day?...If whoever is collecting all of the receipts on carnival race day, why are we paying for the announcer from the government account?”

Mr. Roberts countered, stating that “as far as I know, all of the expenditures for the racetrack, which is the racing surface, the day of the races, is paid through the Horse Racing Improvement Fund. I am not aware of any money being paid through our account.” Senator Violet, however, directed his attention to several checks that “have been paid from your casino account.”

Mr. Roberts noted that Southland Gaming has been paying for other expenses, including security and trash removal – everything outside of the racing office and the track. This arrangement will continue “until the track is actually complete,” he said.

However, Senator Carla Joseph believes that more of the expense burden could be shifted. “They are supposed to be able to absorb some of these costs... You have billing here from November 27, 2024,” she said. “If they are the promoters, they supposed to be absorbing some of those costs, temporary or not.”

With the Clinton E. Phipps race track just one of several sporting facilities in the department’s portfolio for the upcoming fiscal year, DSPR is asking the legislature to approve a budget of \$10,272,040.

At the Randall “Doc” James Race Track, “a geotechnical study has been completed,” and “A&E services are ongoing.” According to Mr. Roberts, “a certified racing surface and repairs to the existing barns are priority.” He later told Senator Novelle Francis, the committee’s chair, that a company will visit the site in July to “start to assess and test soil and kind of guide us on how to proceed with getting a running surface back up and running.” DSPR is also working to identify funding for landscaping in the interim.

At the Emile Griffith Ball Park, DSPR is “actively moving forward with securing funding for essential upgrades, including the installation of new LED lighting and the resurfacing of the facility.” It will require a hefty sum. “Griffith Park itself needs about a million dollars total to get the entire lighting upgraded...because of its location and the fact that we really can’t dig down without running into water,” Mr. Robert stated.

Some 10 playgrounds across the territory are also earmarked for revitalization, Mr. Roberts testified. The department has also identified several facilities that are without LED lights and is “securing funds to have these facilities completed.” DSPR is trying to access \$500,000 for that purpose.

Meanwhile, DSPR is looking forward to the completion of the long-delayed Paul E. Joseph Stadium by December 2025. “The contractor is on site. He is conducting business. DPW is making sure they stay on top of him. They're pushing him. They're pressuring him to meet that December 2025 deadline,” said Mr. Roberts to Sen. Francis.

Mr. Roberts also provided an update on the Lionel Roberts Stadium. “Once the contractor finished the electrical, we found out that the transformer needed to change so we're in communication with WAPA to get that transformer changed.”

Senator Marvin Blyden urged expedience. “I understand a shortage with transformers with WAPA, but at the same time we understand the importance of having those lights in that area and having a park be available for our young people,” he stated. DSPR, he said, needs to see the “bigger picture.”

DSPR's budget request includes \$9,272,040 from the general fund and \$1 million from the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund. The general fund breakdown includes \$4,916,981 for personnel, \$2,943,684 for fringe benefits, \$445,354 for other services, \$161,02 for supplies, and \$805,000 for utilities.