

Bryan Urges Lawmakers to Broaden Scope of Jah'Niqua's Law, Rejects Retirement Pay Reduction Measure as Politically Motivated

While supporting the intent behind Jah'niqua's Law, Governor Bryan vetoed the measure for excluding serious crimes like intentional homicide, and rejected a proposed pension cap for top officials, calling it symbolic and structurally flawed.

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Governor Albert Bryan Jr. By. GOV'T HOUSE.

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. has vetoed two high-profile bills passed during the June 27 session of the 36th Legislature, raising concerns over fairness, enforceability, and the structural integrity of the legislation. Among the vetoed measures were Bill No. 36-0027, commonly referred to as

Jah'niqua's Law, and Bill No. 36-0032, which sought to reduce the salary used to calculate the retirement annuity for the governor and lieutenant governor.

Jah'niqua's Law would have required individuals convicted of certain vehicular crimes to pay child maintenance following an incident resulting in the loss of a child's parent. While acknowledging the sentiment behind the proposal, Governor Bryan rejected the bill for its limited scope, pointing out that it failed to include more serious crimes such as intentional homicide. He argued that such exclusions weakened the bill's broader intent to deliver justice and support for affected families.

The governor also vetoed Bill No. 36-0032, calling it symbolic and structurally flawed. The measure proposed reducing the salary used to calculate pension benefits for the territory's top elected officials. Governor Bryan stressed that protecting the dignity and financial stability of the offices of governor and lieutenant governor is essential, and should not be subject to politically motivated attempts to diminish their roles or compensation structure.

Sponsored by Senator Kurt Vialet, the proposed cap would limit those annuities to \$120,000 and \$100,000 for Bryan and Lt. Gov. Roach respectively—figures that reflect 80% of the original, pre-increase salaries. While these amounts are still substantial, the senator says the cap will prevent even larger obligations in the future.

A third bill, Bill No. 36-0057, which proposed the automatic expungement of arrest records following an acquittal, was also rejected. Governor Bryan expressed concern that eliminating judicial discretion could hinder law enforcement's ability to recognize patterns in recurring cases, potentially compromising public safety.

Additionally, the Governor vetoed Section 9 of Bill No. 36-0064, which would have extended early retirement benefits to psychiatric technicians. He stated that the proposal lacked both an actuarial study and dedicated funding, as required by law. With the Government Employees' Retirement System (GERS) still in a financially vulnerable position, he said any expansion of benefits must be based on proper analysis and secured funding.

In his formal communication to Senate President Milton Potter, Governor Bryan emphasized that while he shares the intentions behind many of the vetoed measures, his decisions were guided by legal clarity, fairness, and fiscal responsibility. "These vetoes are not a rejection of the goals behind the legislation," Bryan wrote. "They are a necessary step to ensure that we protect the financial integrity of our government and treat all Virgin Islanders fairly." He further stated, "My responsibility is not only to sign laws that sound good, but to ensure they work for the people, align with our laws, and support the long-term health of our territory."

Despite the vetoes, Bryan approved several other bills during the session, including:

- Bill No. 36-0012, which simplifies the process for approving disability annuities through the GERS
- Bill No. 36-0024, affirming that individuals in police custody cannot legally consent to sexual activity
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Bill No. 36-0031, limiting liability for emergency service providers unless gross negligence or misconduct is proven

- Bill No. 36-0035, enabling the territory to implement the federal ABLE Act
- Bill No. 36-0043, increasing penalties for sanitation law violations
- Bills No. 36-0050 and 36-0051, modernizing regulations and licensing for the social work profession
- Bill No. 36-0064, with the exception of the vetoed Section 9, which funds educational planning, scholarships, and sports development
- Bill No. 36-0090, creating Virgin Islands Gun Violence Awareness Week
- Bills No. 36-0062 and 36-0098, which approve leases for NOAA operations and helicopter services

The governor also signed three resolutions honoring individuals and organizations for their service and contributions to the territory.