

Legislators Push to Expand Casino Gaming to St. Thomas/St. John, Revisiting 30-Year-Old Law Designed for St. Croix

A proposed amendment by Sen. Alma Francis Heyliger would allow casinos in St. Thomas/St. John for the first time, modernize outdated legislation, dedicate 50% of revenue to hospitals, and expand Casino Control Commission oversight territory-wide.

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Plans are underway to amend 30-year-old legislation to allow casinos to be established in the St. Thomas/St. John district. Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, sponsor of the draft legislation, announced that the bill is still being refined by the Legislature's legal team. Representatives of the Casino Control Commission, attending Monday's sitting of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, were on hand to hear those plans and provide updates on operations

and enforcement.

During the discussion, Senator Marise James raised the concern of what seemed to be illegal slot machines in operation in St. John. The ensuing discussion prompted her to ask whether “we should just go ahead and expand slot machines and casinos over to the island of St. Thomas/St. John?” She posed that question to Marvin Pickering, the Commission’s chairman. Referring to current laws, the lawmaker asked “has this piece of legislation that was created done what it was supposed to do for the island of St. Croix?” Senator James suggested that such operations move to “where [money] is being made.”

Mr. Pickering was amenable, “as long as they're under the purview of the Casino Control Commission.” In St. Thomas/St. John, the V.I. Lottery currently has oversight for sanctioned gaming machines.

The conversation then shifted to whether there was the will to make the necessary amendments. “What's preventing us from trying to make some more money?” asked committee chair Senator Hubert Frederick. Senator Novelle Francis opined that the solution is “political will.” “When you're ready to have that conversation, see me. Until then, we'll continue to chase the chickens,” Sen. Francis told Sen. Frederick.

“That political will existed with me the minute I got elected, and I already submitted that entire update to the law,” Senator Alma Francis Heyliger stated. In her discussion about the draft legislation, the lawmaker commented on the territory’s heavy reliance on now-volatile federal funds. “We have to start revamping some of our laws and tapping into laws that we could tweak to make sure that we are starting to rely on ourselves to bring more revenues into our territory,” Sen. Francis Heyliger advised, highlighting her rationale for pursuing this legislative change.

Per the senator the three-decade-old law was “crafted that particular way because it was the belief at that time that it could help bring hotels to the island of St. Croix.” Therefore, it limited the establishment of casinos only to that district. “Thirty years later, with data, with information, we clearly see that is not the case,” said Sen. Francis Heyliger. She drew her colleagues’ attention to information from the Bureau of Economic Research.

“We need revenues. Why do we not open this law to now allow it to go into the district where the people that we were targeting are actually going to?” she asked of the other lawmakers. Her proposed legislation includes a 50% allocation from generated revenue to the hospital. “Whatever we do here in the territory, we have to start thinking about our people's health,” she noted. The draft bill also expands the purview of the Casino Control Commission across the entire territory.

“I hope the political will of my colleagues is there so that they could also sign on and be serious about potentially tapping into this potential revenue,” she said. “We have to start looking at every single corner, looking at every nickel and dime, every penny that we as representatives could find and hold on to to help run this territory.”