

"You Ain For Us": Tense Hearing Erupts as Horsemen Clash with Senator Violet Over St. Croix Racetrack Funding

Accusations flew during a heated Budget Committee hearing when Flamboyant Park Horsemen Association president Elroy Bates declared Senator Kurt Violet "ain't for us," prompting a sharp rebuttal from the lawmaker and warnings of possible legal action.

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From left to right, Senator Kurt Violet and Flamboyant Park Horsemen Association president Elroy Bates. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

Tension reached a crescendo in the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Tuesday when Elroy Bates, the president of the Flamboyant Park Horsemen Association, declared

that Senator Kurt Violet “ain’t for us,” an accusation that had the lawmaker firing back against his critics in the industry.

The back-and-forth between members of the Flamboyant Park Horsemen Association and the St. Croix senator began over a conversation on the capacity of the new grandstand for the Randall “Doc” James Racetrack. Current plans include seating for up to 2,040 people, a number that several lawmakers considered insufficient.

The Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation explained that the reduction in seating capacity from 3,500 to 2,040 was solely due to cost constraints. DSPR’s Arol Able told Committee chair Senator Novelle Francis that adding 1,000 seats could cost \$2 million to \$3 million more.

That’s when Marcus Knight of the Horsemen Association chimed in and remarked that the 2,040 seating capacity was actually an improvement over the initial design by VIGL, which would have only accommodated 1,500. He pointed a finger at Senator Violet, stating that he “wanted us to take that and then proceed to let the permitting process pass.”

Senator Violet quickly rebutted Mr. Knight’s statement, saying that “I ain’t wanted anybody to take that.” He told the horse racing enthusiasts that they should be concerned with the current plans, before turning his attention to Flamboyant Park Horsemen Association president Elroy Bates.

“I heard you had more than once [on the] airwave saying that this senator, or referring to a senator that’s involved in horse blah, blah blah, is trying to block the bill and is trying to influence senators from voting on the bill,” said Senator Violet, confronting Mr. Bates. The senator warned the horseman to be cautious about his public statements, which apparently included comments alluding to a lawmaker receiving funds from VIGL.

“Be careful of what you’re doing and be careful of what you’re saying on the radio, because I have a tape, and it’s very easy to file a lawsuit. Very, very easy,” Senator Violet warned.

The confusion apparently stems from the failure to pass an amendment to reappropriate \$5 million to the Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation to build the racetrack during a Legislative session. Special ordering an amendment without testimony “doesn’t let the public know as to exactly what is taking place in horse racing and how that is going to move forward,” said Mr. Violet. Mr. Bates confirmed that he had never had a personal discussion with Mr. Violet on the issue.

Violet also took issue with a comment from DSPR’s Arol Able. The lawmaker did not appreciate the suggestion that the running surface of the Randall “Doc” James track be completed to facilitate training horses on St. Croix to then supplement racing on St. Thomas. “Watch where we come to: the racing capital of the Virgin Islands, talking about supplementing races... Watch what we come to,” he lamented.

When it was Mr. Bates’s turn to rebut, he argued that horse owners on St. Croix are spending great sums of money to care for their animals with little scope for return on investment. “For years, they are feeding horses with nothing in sight,” he decried. “They want back some type of money. Every day I’m hearing it in the street. Every day I’m hearing it: when we gonna get a racetrack? We can’t provide a racetrack, but we could provide a racing surface and a housing area for the horses to train. And if the owners choose to take their horses to St. Thomas, that’s up to them.”

“The Legislature never give no kind of funding to the horseman them...but you telling me, because they want some place to train their horses, to take it to St. Thomas, to run, to try and collect some kind of purse. That's a problem? Nah. You ain't for us," Bates fired back.

With Senator Novelle Francis intervening before the back and forth could escalate further, Senator Violet issued a final warning. “You could advocate for anything without trying to defame somebody else,” he told his detractors.

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