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## Senate Postpones Assault-Weapon Ban Debate, Citing Need for Amendments After Weeks of Public Backlash

**Bills limiting assault rifles and THC compounds were withdrawn for redrafting after widespread criticism from gun-rights advocates and residents. The move ignited a heated exchange among senators over transparency and respect for constituents.**

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**Assault rifles. By. GETTY IMAGES.**

Testifiers waiting to formally comment on Bill 36-0144, an act that seeks to prohibit assault rifles, ban suppressors and silencers, among other considerations, were stymied as the bill was struck from the agenda of Thursday's meeting of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary. Bill 36-0105, [a measure](#) to prohibit the possession, sale, or manufacture of tetrahydrocannabinol acid, delta-6

THC, delta- 8 THC and delta-10 THC products in the territory, was similarly removed.

Both bills are authored by Senator Clifford Joseph, but it was Senator Kenneth Gittens who introduced the motion to remove both bills from Thursday's agenda. Both measures have been rescheduled before, after first moving swiftly through the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety with minimal on-the-record opposition.

Since that initial hearing, the public's response to both measures following articles published on The Consortium, (read the community's reaction [here](#) and [here](#)), has grown in the intervening weeks. Kosei Ohno, founder of Virgin Islands Safe Gun Owners, has issued multiple statements critical of Bill 36-0144, arguing that the measure prevents legal gun owners from arming themselves as well as lawbreakers would be. On Thursday, he wrote that "many members are taking time off work...so they could be present and be heard." Though the gallery was full, Mr. Ohno, his colleagues, and representatives of the Office of the Attorney General were not afforded the opportunity to speak. Even in prior conversations with the bill's sponsor, Mr. Ohno said, he was interrupted, dismissed, and not given the opportunity to make the case on behalf of law-abiding gun owners in the territory.

Committee chair Senator Carla Joseph was the only lawmaker to oppose the motion to return the bills to their committee of jurisdiction, particularly Bill 36-0144. She made her disappointment in the majority's decision abundantly clear.

"We have representation here from the Attorney General's Office, and not to allow them to have an opportunity and to dismiss them is very unconscionable," she said. Instructing the Legislature's media team to pan to the full gallery, she stated that "the people has a voice, and as long as I remain the chair of this committee, they will have a voice, and they needed to be heard and not be dismissed today."

Sen. Joseph then held up her copy of the Constitution, noting that it offers freedom of speech, and lamented that individuals had their time wasted on Thursday.

However, Sen. Gittens placed the blame for the snafu squarely on Sen. Joseph's shoulders. He argued that it was a "crying shame that my colleague would do such a thing to put it on the backs of the members [of the] committee. He stated that Sen. Joseph received "information in writing" from the bill's sponsor requesting that the measure be left off the agenda. This was necessary to "give him ample time to address the amendments needed" Gittens said.

He was forced to bring the motion "because the chairwoman ignored, not only the verbal request to have them removed, but also the written request that was sent to her office in ample time," Gittens argued.

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, too, considered the chair's statements to be "very disrespectful and disingenuous." She insisted that Senator Clifford Joseph, the bills' sponsor, asked the committee chair to "please stop what she was doing," but instead Sen. Francis Heyliger said that Ms. Joseph "continuously invited people already knowing that this decision was coming forward."

"I understand the need to grandstand, but the fact of the matter is several of the people in the chambers right now, we communicated with them," Francis Heyliger said. It is these very conversations that she said encouraged legislators to "collectively" hold back and amend the bill.

“We had one colleague on her own, even though we told her we want to send it back to make sure we do our best to not make criminals out of law-abiding citizens...one person on their own, decided to keep inviting people because she wanted to do what she wanted to do,” Francis Heyliger continued.

Defending her name, Sen. Carla Joseph explained that “invitations were already sent out way before.” Senator Avery Lewis later countered that claim, stating that “he came in writing, long before anyone got invitation, long before any agenda were created.”

“I don't want us in this body, and our integrity, to be in a position where we are stifling people voice,” Sen. Joseph argued. “We cannot be a body where we are not including persons who are affected by certain legislation. That's hypocritical. We are their servants, and they have every right, and they shouldn't be dismissed,” she lamented.

Finally speaking on his own behalf, Senator Clifford Joseph noted that he is considering the public's comments but “at the end of the day, we have to bring forward what's in the best interest of the people.” He assured the waiting testifiers that he has not “denied anybody from having a chance to put their information forward for us to listen to.” Instead, he wants to reconvene on Friday, October 17, to discuss the bills as amended by the Legislature's legal counsel.

An October 8 press release from Senator Clifford Joseph signaled his intent to return his bills to the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety for “substantial amendments and consideration.”

“These individuals have a chance, still, to call us now,” he offered.

The version of Bill 36-0144 that will return to the Committee on Homeland Security in just over a week is expected to be vastly different from the original iteration. Therefore, Senator Clifford Joseph argued, “It is not productive to take testimony on measures that will look substantially different to amendments and only lend to further confusion and misinformation being circulated in the community.”

Senator Milton Potter supported his colleague's decision to delay consideration of the measures. “He recognized the deficiency with the bill, and he's saying give me time to fix it... This senator is not trying to pull the wool over anybody's eyes.”