

Hearing Delayed on Bill to Ban Machine Gun Conversion Devices in the Virgin Islands

An Oct. 17 hearing on Sen. Angel Bolque's Bill has been delayed along with other legislation. The measure seeks to ban the possession and sale of machine gun conversion devices and impose fines of up to \$100,000 or 10 years in prison.

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Editor's Note: This article has been updated to correct an error with the authorship of Bill 36-0151, sponsored by Senator Angel Bolques Jr.

A legislative session of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety set for Friday, October 17 has been postponed, once again delaying debate on a series of measures — chief among them, Bill No. 36-0151, a proposal to criminalize the possession and sale of machine

gun conversion devices in the Virgin Islands.

The notice of postponement offered no explanation or new date for when the bills will return to the committee's agenda.

Sponsored by Senator Angel L. Bolques Jr., Bill No. 36-0151 seeks to amend Title 23 of the Virgin Islands Code to strengthen firearm laws by explicitly banning the possession, sale, manufacture, importation, or distribution of machine gun conversion devices — mechanisms that can turn semi-automatic weapons into fully automatic firearms.

The legislation defines a “machine gun conversion device” as any component, including conversion chips, three-dimensional printed parts, binary triggers, or selector plate mimics, that enable a firearm to discharge multiple rounds with a single trigger action.

Under the bill, violations would carry steep penalties — fines of up to \$100,000, prison sentences of up to 10 years, or both. All illegal devices would be subject to immediate seizure and forfeiture. Exceptions are provided for law enforcement officers, active-duty military personnel, and licensed firearms manufacturers acting within the scope of their duties and in compliance with federal and territorial law.

If enacted, the law would take effect 90 days after passage, with the V.I. Police Department Commissioner directed to establish regulations for seizure, forfeiture, and enforcement.

Not included on Friday's agenda, however, was Bill 36-0144, an act that seeks to prohibit assault rifles, ban suppressors and silencers, among other considerations.

Originally forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary with a favorable vote, the measure has been in limbo for months after twice failing to be heard there, each time sparking disagreement among lawmakers.

The most recent conflict occurred after a motion to remove the bill from the October 9 schedule led to tense exchanges. Committee Chair Senator Carla Joseph was accused by Senator Kenneth Gittens of “unprofessional and disruptive” conduct for allegedly failing to withdraw the measure at the request of its sponsor. Mr. Gittens has since called for a formal review of her actions, citing an “ongoing pattern of disruptive conduct and misuse of procedural privileges.”

Although the measure has drawn growing support from gun-control advocates, it has also faced organized pushback from the Virgin Islands Safe Gun Owners Association (VISGOA). In an October 14 letter, VISGOA founder Kosei Ohno requested that lawmakers provide at least a two-week notice before any hearing, allowing time for legal research and consultation.

Mr. Ohno's correspondence, sent to Senator Bolques and other legislators, also requested data on confiscated firearms, firearm license applications, and fees collected under firearm regulations, arguing that informed discussion required transparency on enforcement statistics.

The delay means both proponents and opponents must continue to wait for the revised version of the bill. Senator Bolques has said amendments will be “comprehensive,” with significant changes from the original language.

Other Measures Also Affected

The committee's postponement also impacts two other bills that were slated for review Friday.

- Bill 36-0105, which proposes amending Title 7 of the Virgin Islands Code to prohibit the possession, sale, or manufacture of tetrahydrocannabinol acid, delta-6 THC, delta-8 THC, and delta-10 THC products, will now be rescheduled.
- Bill 36-0139, seeking to amend Title 31 to assess civil liability for destruction or damage to government property caused by willful or negligent acts, has also been delayed.

The memo issued by Senator Bolques's office provided no details on the reasons for the postponement or when the committee plans to reconvene.

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