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Gittens Calls for Vessels in USVI Harbors to be Screened Amid Coronavirus Crisis

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Charlotte Amalie Waterfront on Thursday, March 28, 2020 By. ERNICE GILBERT/ VI CONSORTIUM

Noting what seems to be an exponential increase in the number of vessels in Virgin Islands harbors, Senator Kenneth Gittens in a release issued Tuesday called on the Bryan administration to step up marine law enforcement monitoring efforts in order to better protect Virgin Islanders from possible exposure to the Corona Virus.

“We know for a fact that most of the cases of COVID19 here in the Territory originated with those that had been recently traveling abroad and we have no idea where these boats and their passengers have been in recent weeks,” Mr. Gittens said. “We must enforce quarantine measures

to ensure that Virgin Islanders are not put at further risk.”

According to the release, Mr. Gittens brought his concerns to Governor Albert Bryan’s attention on Monday after observing an influx of vessels into our harbors and mooring areas, many of which may have come from the British Virgin Islands following the implementation of a strict 24-hour curfew there. The governor pledged to direct all available local resources to checking on these boats and, at Mr. Gittens’s urging, will also call on federal agencies, to include U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. National Park Service for assistance, according to the release.

“First and foremost, we need to ensure these boats are here lawfully and then enforce quarantine measures of some kind,” the senator said. “We do need to find a way for those here legitimately to get essential supplies, but if we are not allowing visitors in our hotels, we certainly should not allow them in our harbors. The BVI is under a mandatory lockdown and apparently many of the vessels that were based there have sought refuge in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where we have more freedom of movement.”

Mr. Gittens said he would be following up with the Office of the Governor on Wednesday to ensure that proper coordination of the various agencies was underway and to offer his professional assistance in this effort if required.

“This is a small community and we are discouraging all visitors at this time. We simply can’t have people just jumping off a boat from parts unknown and mingling with our population in the essential businesses that remain open here. Anyone entering the U.S. Virgin Islands must be thoroughly interviewed, tested and quarantined as necessary,” he said.

Earlier this year and prior to the local Corona Virus threat, the St. Croix senator proposed legislation to ensure that all vessels mooring in territorial waters immediately check in with local authorities. As the law stands now, those coming from U.S. destinations have 14 days before they must report their location to the Department of Planning & Natural Resources.