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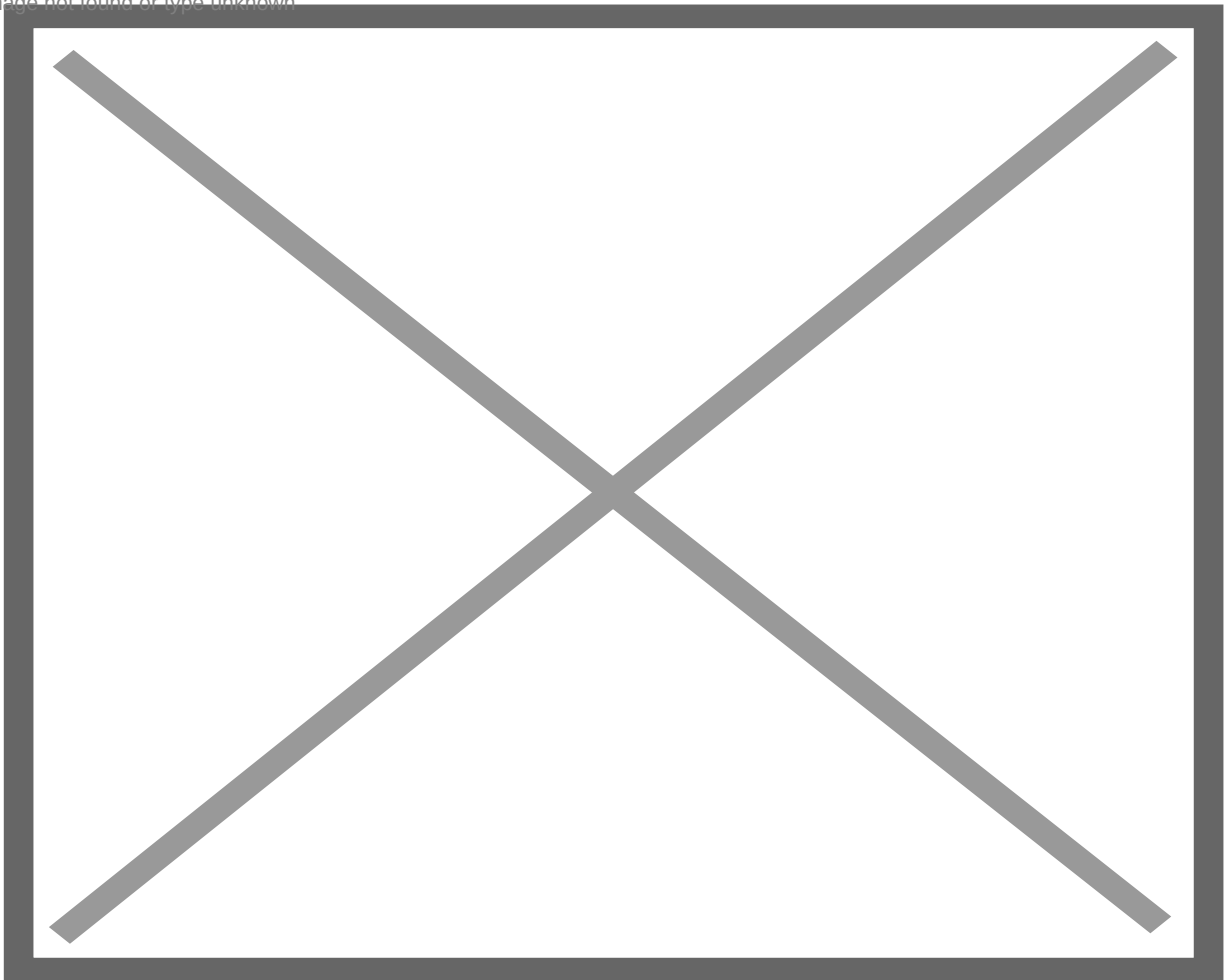
Bill to Restore VI Lottery Autonomy Held as Lawmakers Seek More Financial Input

Lottery Executive Director Raymond Williams said a 2022 attorney general opinion forced the agency into central government procurement, but some lawmakers said they were not ready to restore autonomy without input from Finance and OMB.

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A bill aimed at restoring the Virgin Islands Lottery's autonomy won support from some lawmakers Tuesday, but was ultimately held in committee after concerns were raised about whether senators had heard enough from the government's financial leadership before moving forward. At the center of the debate was a 2022 opinion from then-Attorney General Denise George, which found that the law creating the Lottery did not properly establish it as autonomous.

According to Raymond Williams, executive director of the Virgin Islands Lottery, that opinion determined that the Lottery qualifies as an executive branch instrumentality and is therefore required to use the Department of Property and Procurement for all procurement needs.

Mr. Williams appeared before the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection in support of Bill 36-0233, sponsored by Senator Avery Lewis. The measure would amend Title 32, Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 13, relating to the establishment and operation of the Virgin Islands Lottery.

Mr. Williams told lawmakers the proposed amendments are intended to address the shortcoming identified by the Attorney General by “reaffirming and restoring the autonomy the Virgin Islands Lottery was originally intended to possess.”

He testified that the Lottery has operated independently of central government “for almost its entire existence” and does not rely on government appropriations. “We not only generate our own revenue, but also transfer appropriations to the general fund,” Mr. Williams noted.

He also argued that the Lottery’s Commission and administration provide the oversight needed to ensure the entity is operating appropriately. According to Mr. Williams, stand-alone and quasi-public lottery models “consistently demonstrate stronger commercial performance.”

“Once property autonomy is restored, we will be in a better position to enhance performance and operational efficiency, positioning the organization to compete more effectively and generate greater revenue...” Mr. Williams declared.

The committee had also invited the commissioner of Finance and the director of the Office of Management and Budget to testify, but neither appeared.

Even so, Senator Kenneth Gittens said he was not deterred by their absence. “Given the significance of that policy shift, it may have been beneficial for us to also hear from additional neutral parties,” he noted. Still, he supported the bill.

Senator Carla Joseph also voiced support for the measure. “I am going to vote in the affirmative for this legislation to give you full autonomy, because you are producing,” she said.

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, however, said the discussion could not be complete without input from the Department of Finance and OMB.

“I can't see myself pushing this forward to give this agency autonomy and make them autonomous when I need to have a financial conversation, as is this in our best interest,” she stated.

Before the measure was held, Mr. Williams made a final appeal to lawmakers, saying the Lottery has several initiatives that will “help to enhance our revenue generation.” He did not disclose those initiatives on the record. He added, however, that “we gotta take the bureaucracy out of it so that we can propel our enterprise.”

Despite support voiced during the hearing, including Senator Avery Lewis’s statement that “the Lottery has been delivering and continues to deliver,” the bill was ultimately held in committee.

It remains unclear whether lawmakers will seek testimony or an opinion from the Department of Finance and the Office of Management and Budget when the measure returns to the floor.

