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Bryan Administration Decision to Shutdown Beaches for Residents Yet Open Them Up for Private Boats is Troubling, Sen. Blyden Says

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Boats scattered on the Charlotte Amalie Waterfront on St. Thomas two weeks ago By. ERNICE GILBERT/VI CONSORTIUM

Senator Marvin Blyden, who called earlier this week for a moratorium on anchoring permits to stem the flow of visiting private boats, has sharply disagreed with the Bryan administration's decision to close the territory's beaches to residents while opening some of those same beaches to private boats from abroad. Mr. Blyden's statement came in response to the Governor Albert Bryan's announcement that effective April 6 [all beaches in the territory would be closed](#) for at least the next two weeks due to concerns over the coronavirus.

The Democratic senator said that while he understands and shares concerns that many people have failed to practice social distancing at the territory's beaches, the administration's actions amount to unequal treatment since the administration just recently opened additional beaches for anchoring by private boats that have flooded the territory in recent weeks.

"Just last week, I met with a top official of the administration and suggested a moratorium on anchoring permits so that we could slow the flow of boats that have flooded our harbors and beaches over the last month," Mr. Blyden said. "I pointed out that no screening of the passengers is taking place, and that the territory doesn't have the resources to monitor and enforce compliance with the regulations that have been established for the more than 500 vessels that the administration expects will come to the territory over the course of the next month."

Mr. Blyden added, "The administration's response has been that, 'These are American-registered vessels, so we can't deny them access to our waters.' Yet, days later, we are being told that the government can indeed restrict American citizens from our waters, but that it will only use those powers against the residents—not against those who are temporarily using our shorelines for their refuge or convenience. How is the administration planning to manage the recreational activities of the individuals aboard the vessels? Will they be allowed to swim?"

Mr. Blyden also noted that the environmental impact of the boat invasion is already being felt. "This is a matter that I raised in my discussion last week with DPNR, as I was concerned about the coronavirus and the impact of these vessels in some of our most environmentally sensitive shoreline areas," he said. "I specifically raised the issue of whether we had sufficient capacity and pumping stations to handle the solid wastes generated by the boats, and whether we have sufficient resources to monitor and enforce compliance.

"I could not receive assurances that these elements were actually in place," Mr. Blyden added, the senator said he was scheduled to meet with the Waste Management Authority on Tuesday to further discuss the matter.

The senator said he was "equally disturbed to learn that DPNR has ceased to conduct water quality testing so that at the very least, we can get an idea of whether vessels are complying with the requirement to pump out their wastes at a pumping station or outside the three-mile limit."

He added, "In fact, the closure of important testing and monitoring offices and functions due to COVID-19 is yet another reason why we should be limiting the number of vessels in our waters instead of increasing them. Unfortunately, I can report from the experiences of my staff and others who use Brewers Bay that over the last week, there is increasing evidence that human wastes are being dumped into our waters. Additionally, it is clear that the anchoring of so many boats has negatively affected the seagrass, seaweed, and coral in this important turtle nesting area."

Mr. Blyden said that decisions and policies of the government should apply equally. "If, in the governor's wisdom, the closure of our beaches is necessary for the public health during this time of crisis, then so be it. I too have watched in dismay as many persons have been using permission to go to the beach and exercise as license to go to the beach and socialize. So although it pains me and many other people personally, I can accept a decision to temporarily close the beaches as a painful but prudent exercise in caution.

"But doing this on one hand while opening our shorelines even wider to visiting vessels on the other is simply, to my mind, unfair and unjust. Our shorelines shouldn't be closed to our people and open to everyone else," Mr. Blyden concluded.

