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Firearms Bill With 15-Round Magazine Limit and Suppressor Ban Heads to Governor After Months of Opposition and Heated Debate

Bill 36-0144 would ban suppressors and silencers, prohibit assault rifles, restrict magazines holding more than 15 rounds, set sensitive-place limits and revise licensing rules, drawing opposition from licensed gun owners.

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Nine months after it was [first introduced](#), and following delayed hearings, significant public opposition, petitions and multiple amendments, Bill 36-0144 has received a favorable vote from the full Legislature. Governor Albert Bryan Jr. must now decide whether to approve the measure.

The bill, sponsored by Senator Clifford Joseph, has become one of the most controversial measures taken up by the 36th Legislature. It seeks to define and prohibit assault rifles, ban suppressors and silencers, require safety training for licensed rifle and shotgun holders, prohibit large-capacity magazines, and prevent the illegal sale of firearms, firearm accessories and ammunition.

The bill first advanced from the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety in September 2025. Since then, licensed firearm holders have strongly opposed the measure, arguing that it infringes upon Second Amendment rights. Attorney General Gordon Rhea has continued to disagree with that position, but resistance to the bill has remained firmly rooted.

When Bill 36-0144 was assigned to the Committee of the Whole on Friday, it had been revised approximately four times. The version before lawmakers was presented as a substitute bill, with significant changes made since September. Senator Joseph acknowledged that the bill would not satisfy everyone.

Attorney General Defends Bill as Public Safety Measure

Attorney General Rhea maintained his support for the measure, saying “it was written to protect the constitutional rights of law-abiding Virgin Islanders to keep and bear arms” while giving police the tools to “keep illegal guns out of the wrong hands.”

The push for passage of Bill 36-0144 comes as the federal Department of Justice [has sued](#) the Government of the Virgin Islands over sections of local firearms licensing law. Portions of the territory’s licensing laws have been deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, and if the local Department of Justice loses the case, the entire statute could be struck down, Mr. Rhea explained.

Bill 36-0144, he said, is “how we keep control of our own firearms policy...”

Mr. Rhea insisted that “the Supreme Court’s recent decisions do not leave us without options, and they certainly do not require us to abandon public safety.” According to the attorney general, Supreme Court justices have said governments may “keep firearms away from felons and the dangerously mentally ill” and may restrict firearms in “sensitive places” such as schools. Those provisions are included in Bill 36-0144.

Mr. Rhea described the bill as a “marked improvement over the law we have today.” He pointed to the elimination of the “proper cause requirement,” which was central to the Supreme Court case in New York. The measure also sets an enforceable 45-day deadline for the Police Commissioner to act on a license application.

The amended bill sets the application fee at \$150. Renewals would be required every five years at a cost of \$50. The bill also allows licensed individuals to carry a “concealed firearm in public for their own protection” and “expressly respects the privacy of the home.”

Bill 36-0144 would require firearms to be kept out of sensitive places, including government buildings, hospitals, schools, correctional facilities, “polling places while voting is underway,” and large public events such as carnival. It also prohibits what Mr. Rhea called “the most dangerous weapons which have no place in our neighborhoods.”

The measure also restricts “especially dangerous accessories,” including “large capacity magazines,” silencers and conversion devices.

Mr. Rhea said the Department of Justice was deliberate in building a “framework designed to withstand challenge.”

Gun Owners and Advocates Push Back

Despite the attorney general’s support, Bill 36-0144 faced repeated challenges Friday from local and national gun rights advocates.

Kosei Ohno, founder of Virgin Islands Safe Gun Owners, asked lawmakers to hold the bill and instead adopt an amendment prepared by VISGO. He said the 60-page document was “written by the people, for the people, not by the government for the government.”

Mr. Ohno, like several other community members, argued that crimes are not typically committed by licensed firearm holders. He said the bill burdens “law-abiding people who register, train, pay, wait, and try to obey.” He also accused lawmakers of “legislation by ambush.”

Several invited testifiers said they had not yet seen the latest version of the bill.

Ehren Henderson, a former gun shop owner, expressed similar concerns. He said he had also not seen the newest version of the measure, but found the sensitive place restrictions too broad. Mr. Henderson also raised concerns about mental health disqualifiers for licensure, which he described as “too vague.”

Attorney General Rhea has promised supplementary amendments addressing issues of that nature. Senator Marvin Blyden is also expected to offer future amendments.

Mr. Henderson also objected to the bill’s definition of large-capacity magazines as those holding more than 15 rounds. He argued that the provision “puts licensed citizens at a disadvantage against criminals” and that restricting capacity for lawful firearm holders will “not stop violent criminals.”

Instead, he said, “it only weakens our ability to defend ourselves and our families.”

Senator Marise James later explained that licensed individuals who already own firearms that hold more than 15 rounds would be grandfathered into the legislation. Several lawmakers, including Senator Angel Bolques Jr., questioned how the Department of Justice and the V.I. Police Department arrived at the 15-round limit.

Luis Valdes, Southeast Regional Director for Gun Owners of America, also sharply opposed the bill. He criticized the Legislature for seeking to ban suppressors, which he said are used to reduce gun noise at ranges. Mr. Valdes said lawmakers were seeking to ban something that is “beneficial for public health.”

He also objected to the term “large capacity magazine,” calling it “politically arduous and propagandous.” According to Mr. Valdes, those magazines are standard.

Like Mr. Ohno, Mr. Valdes said he was open to working with lawmakers to rewrite the bill. He suggested that the measure was simply an attempt to “moot” the federal Department of Justice lawsuit. He also said the multiple amendments and the alleged lack of public access to the latest

version “reeks of malfeasance, both politically and legislatively.”

Kostos Moros, Director of Legal Research and Education at the Second Amendment Foundation, warned that the federal lawsuit “doesn’t just go away” if Bill 36-0144 is enacted. He predicted that the U.S. Department of Justice would “amend it and grow it to cover all these other things you’re doing.”

Mr. Moros encouraged the local Department of Justice to wait for the outcome of the federal lawsuit before attempting to address issues beyond licensing.

Lawmakers Weigh Public Safety Against Gun Rights Concerns

Friday’s discussion required lawmakers to consider several competing arguments, including public safety, Second Amendment concerns, the effect on law-abiding gun owners, the bill’s perceived restrictiveness and whether the measure would affect crime rates.

Senator Novelle Francis described the bill as “a step in the right direction” and said the territory needs “structure” rather than becoming a “wild, wild west.” He agreed, however, that the magazine capacity provision should be reviewed.

Senator Kurt Vialet questioned why opponents were “questioning every single thing to make sure the Virgin Islands is not as safe as possible.”

Senators Alma Francis Heyliger and Carla Joseph were the only lawmakers to vote against the measure.

Senator Francis Heyliger cited concerns about the ban on accessories, public health issues raised by Mr. Valdes, caliber provisions, sensitive place restrictions and language involving voluntary mental health admission. She worried that individuals “might not go get the help that they need” if they feared their firearm could be seized. Senator Blyden has promised to address that concern.

“All these penalties that we’re trying to tack on to the law-abiding citizens are actually the actions of the criminals. So I’m trying to figure out what exactly are we doing,” Senator Francis Heyliger said. Members of the audience opposed to the bill applauded.

Senator Carla Joseph raised concerns about due process related to license applications and the new deadline. She said she was concerned about placing “law-abiding citizens in a precarious position.”

For now, Friday’s vote ends an extended legislative process marked by repeated revisions, heated debate and deep dissatisfaction among many licensed firearm holders. The measure now rests with Governor Bryan.