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Bryan Signs Firearms Reform Bill, Approves Education, Recreation and Public Employee Measures

Bryan signed Bill 36-0144, modernizing firearm licensing and registration and banning suppressors, silencers and large-capacity magazines, after gun-rights advocates objected, Senator Mike Lee urged a veto and a federal suppressor ruling raised questions.

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Ernice Gilbert **June 25, 2026**

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Governor Albert Bryan Jr. has signed Bill No. 36-0144 into law, approving a major overhaul of the territory's firearm licensing and registration framework after months of local opposition, a federal veto request from U.S. Senator Mike Lee, and continued legal scrutiny surrounding the Second Amendment and suppressor restrictions.

The firearm legislation, identified by the V.I. Department of Justice as the “2026 Second Amendment Rights and Public Safety Act,” modernizes the territory’s firearm licensing and registration laws and brings them into conformity with recent U.S. Supreme Court rulings, according to Government House.

The measure removes subjective discretion from the firearm licensing process, establishes clearer standards and simplifies licensing and registration requirements for lawful gun owners. Governor Bryan said the update was necessary to preserve effective firearm regulation while protecting the constitutional rights of law-abiding residents.

“This is a common-sense measure which protects the rights of law-abiding residents to bear arms while placing rational parameters on weapons in our community,” Governor Bryan said.

Government House said the territory’s previous law was overly burdensome and vulnerable to being invalidated in federal court, which could have left the Virgin Islands without adequate firearm regulations.

“At a time when we are experiencing a devastating level of gun violence in our neighborhoods, ensuring proper licensure and registration aids law enforcement in identifying those operating outside the law,” Governor Bryan said. “We cannot, and should not, abdicate our responsibility to enact sensible laws to protect the well-being of the community simply because some bad actors, determined to break the law, are undeterred.”

The governor had signaled a day earlier that his approval of the measure was nearly certain, despite concerns raised by gun-rights advocates and Senator Lee. Speaking Tuesday, Mr. Bryan described the current firearms framework as inadequate.

“The gun control laws in the Virgin Islands, they don’t protect the citizens, they protect the criminals, because they keep the citizens unarmed,” he declared.

While acknowledging that the bill had drawn objections, Mr. Bryan said the territory needed to establish a new legal baseline rather than leave the existing statutes in place.

“I heard everybody on the concerns, but we gotta start somewhere,” the governor said. “I’m not gonna veto this bill and go all the way back to the crap that we have on the books now.”

Mr. Bryan also linked the need for reform to the territory’s firearm licensing structure, which has been the subject of a lawsuit filed by the U.S. Department of Justice against the Virgin Islands Police Department and Police Commissioner Mario Brooks. The lawsuit challenges the territory’s licensing practices, including alleged delays and conditions imposed on applicants.

The governor said the territory needed a clearer framework so future administrations could not apply firearm licensing rules inconsistently.

“We got to get something passed, so when we have an administration change, the next [VIPD] commissioner can’t willy-nilly deny or accept applications and set rules.”

The bill has been strongly supported by V.I. Attorney General Gordon C. Rhea, who commended the governor for signing it and described the law as a significant step in modernizing the territory’s firearms regulations while enhancing public safety.

The Department of Justice said the legislation was sponsored by Senator Clifford Joseph and developed through a collaborative effort involving the DOJ, the Office of the Governor, the Virgin Islands Police Department, and members and staff of the 36th Legislature.

According to DOJ, the measure amends Chapter 113 of Title 14 of the Virgin Islands Code by establishing clearer standards for firearm licensing and registration, defining and prohibiting assault rifles, banning suppressors and silencers, requiring firearm safety training for licensed rifle and shotgun owners, prohibiting large-capacity magazines, and strengthening safeguards against the illegal sale of firearms, firearm accessories and ammunition.

"I want to thank Governor Albert Bryan Jr. for his leadership and for signing this critically important legislation into law," Attorney General Rhea said. "This measure represents a thoughtful and balanced approach to firearms regulation that respects the constitutional rights of law-abiding citizens while providing law enforcement with the tools necessary to protect our communities from gun violence and dangerous weapons."

Mr. Rhea said the new law modernizes the territory's firearms laws and establishes clear, constitutionally sound standards governing the possession, licensing and carrying of firearms.

"The new law brings coherence and clarity to our firearms regulatory system while preserving important safeguards that protect residents and visitors alike," Rhea said. "It prohibits some of the most dangerous weapons and accessories, strengthens restrictions on individuals who pose a threat to public safety, and ensures that firearms remain prohibited in sensitive locations such as schools, hospitals, government buildings, and large public gatherings."

Still, the measure has faced sustained pushback from local gun-rights advocates, who have argued that it is overly restrictive and that the process limited public input. Former gun shop owner Ehren Henderson said Bill 36-0144 "only weakens our ability to defend ourselves and our families."

Kosei Ohno, head of Virgin Islands Safe Gun Owners, previously cited months of last-minute invitations to testify, abruptly canceled legislative debates and uncirculated amendments as evidence of what opponents viewed as an effort to limit dissenting voices.

Federal scrutiny also emerged before the governor signed the bill. During Governor Bryan's June 17 appearance before the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Senator Mike Lee of Utah asked him to "consider a veto" of the measure.

"It appears to present serious questions as to whether it can withstand scrutiny under the Second Amendment," Senator Lee said.

The suppressor ban has also drawn attention because of ongoing federal litigation. In *United States v. Peterson*, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit assumed without deciding that suppressors constitute "arms" under the Second Amendment, because both parties agreed on that point. The court nevertheless upheld the federal suppressor-registration scheme as presumptively constitutional in that case. The U.S. Supreme Court later declined to review the Peterson case, leaving the Fifth Circuit judgment in place.

That ruling did not decide the constitutionality of the Virgin Islands' new suppressor ban, which is separate from the federal registration framework. However, it has added to questions raised by opponents over whether the local ban could face legal challenges.

Governor Bryan addressed those concerns before signing the bill, describing the suppressor ruling as preliminary and saying the territory would not defer local legislation unless there is a final judicial decision on the issue.

"We'll wait until it gets to the Supreme Court, but I am 99.99999% sure that we're going to sign this gun bill this week," Governor Bryan said.

Attorney General Rhea thanked the Legislature for supporting the measure and recognized those who contributed to its development.

"I commend Senator Clifford Joseph for sponsoring this legislation and thank the members of the 36th Legislature for their careful consideration and passage of this important public safety measure," he said. "This law reflects what can be accomplished when branches of government work together toward a common goal."

Mr. Rhea also acknowledged the work of VIPD, legislative staff and DOJ personnel who played roles in drafting and advancing the legislation.

"I especially want to recognize Assistant Attorney General Sean Bailey and St. Thomas Criminal Division Chief Timothy Perry for their invaluable work and dedication throughout this process," Rhea said. "Their expertise and commitment were instrumental in bringing this legislation to fruition."

The Attorney General said the new law strikes an appropriate balance between protecting constitutional rights and promoting public safety.

Governor Bryan also approved Bill No. 36-0309, which appropriates \$383,784 from the Virgin Islands Education Initiative Fund to the Department of Education to conduct extended school year evaluations to determine whether students are eligible for special education services.

That measure also amends Act No. 7757 regarding the naming of successor legislative conference rooms in honor of former Senator at Large Cleone Henrietta Creque. It also extends the period for disbursing appropriations for the equestrian training facility authorized under Act No. 8951.

The governor approved Bill No. 36-0310, which amends Acts Nos. 8870 and 8985 concerning appropriations for the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School track and field facilities.

He also approved Bill No. 36-0312, which amends Act No. 9022 regarding compensation for unused leave owed to legislative employees when they separate from government service.

Governor Bryan also acknowledged the Legislature's override of Section 9 of Act No. 9100.

"I thank the members of the Thirty-Sixth Legislature for their work on behalf of the people of the Territory," Governor Bryan said.