

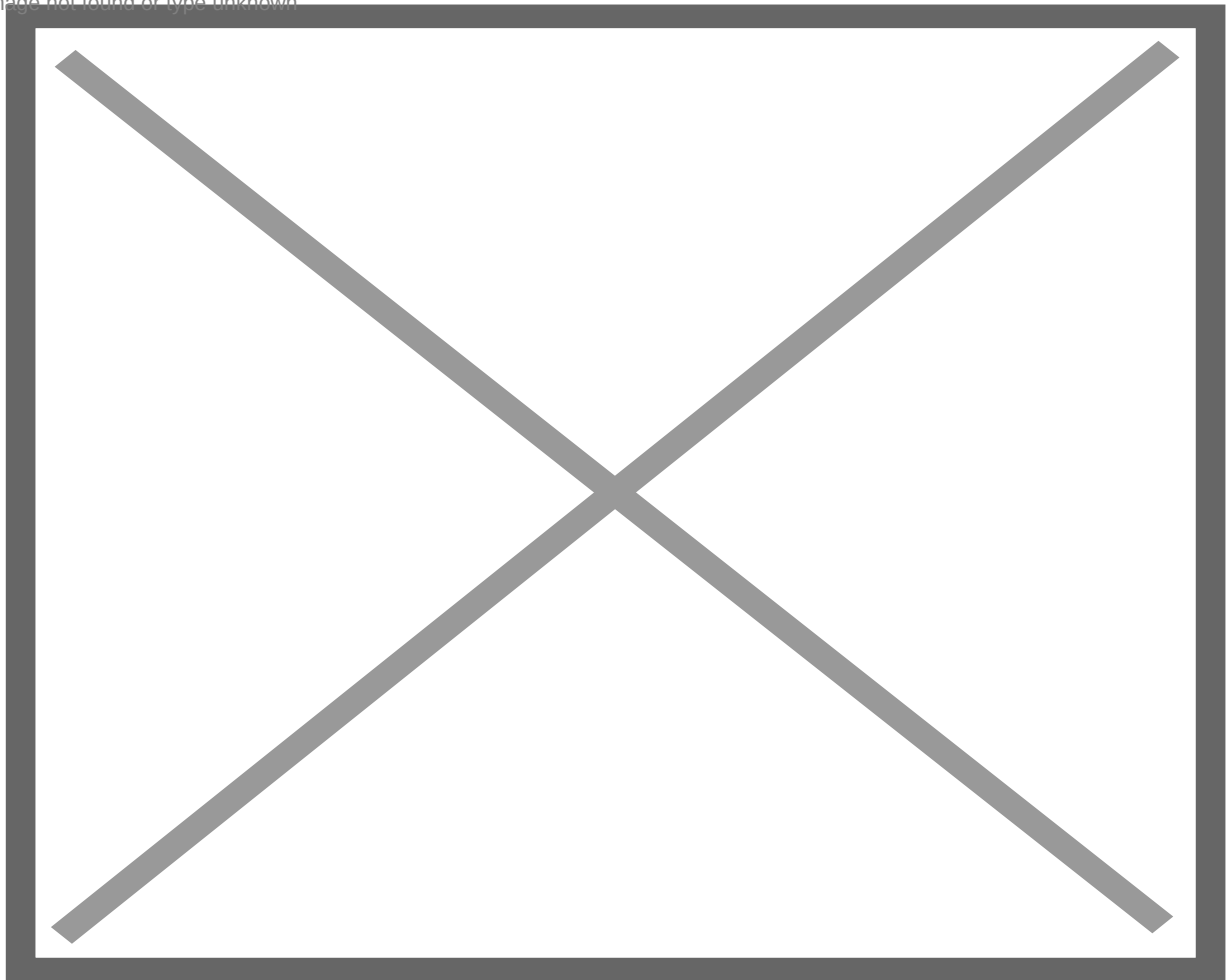
Bryan's Special Session Ends Without Vote as Senate Seeks More Review of Horse Racing Deal

Bryan's special session ended without a vote after eight senators moved the Southland Gaming agreement to an Aug. 19 Committee of the Whole hearing, as supporters demanded action and opponents sought fuller review of its gaming, tax and regulatory terms.

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Governor Albert Bryan Jr. By. GOV'T HOUSE.

ST. CROIX — The Senate declined Tuesday to vote on the revised agreement between the Government of the Virgin Islands and Southland Gaming, with eight of the 15 senators instead sending the measure to an Aug. 19 Committee of the Whole hearing and scheduling a Legislative Session for Aug. 21.

The decision prevented the special session called by Governor Albert Bryan Jr. from producing the immediate up-or-down vote he had sought on the agreement, which is intended to support the restoration of horse racing at the Randall “Doc” James Racetrack on St. Croix.

The special session began well after its advertised time, a delay lawmakers attributed to the V.I. Water and Power Authority and another electrical outage on St. Thomas.

No testifiers were seated in the legislative well when the session convened, confirming Mr. Bryan’s earlier concern that stakeholders had not been invited to testify. Representatives including the commissioner of the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation were present in the audience, but their testimony will not be heard until Aug. 19.

The Committee of the Whole does not take votes. Lawmakers are scheduled to reconvene in Legislative Session on Aug. 21, when a decision on the agreement is expected.

The Senate president could have recessed the Legislative Session, convened the Committee of the Whole to receive testimony and then returned to the session for a vote. That procedure has been used several times during the 36th Legislature.

Senator Ray Fonseca attempted to follow that process Tuesday, but his motion failed.

Several lawmakers said the additional month would provide time to examine the proposal, which contains provisions extending beyond a conventional lease agreement.

Potter Questions Timing and Scope of Special Session

The intention to delay a final vote became apparent at the beginning of the proceedings.

Senate President Milton Potter said the timing and “singular focus” of the special session “are deeply puzzling in light of the crises unfolding all around us.”

Although he acknowledged horse racing’s importance to the cultural fabric of St. Croix, Mr. Potter said provisions involving “long-term leases, gaming revenues, tax exemptions” required “thorough, transparent vetting, not rushed consideration.”

He questioned the administration’s decision to prioritize the agreement through a special session while the territory confronts other unresolved problems.

“It is difficult to understand why, of all the urgent matters before us, the governor has chosen to summon the Legislature into special session to prioritize a horse racing lease agreement at a moment when our people are demanding solutions on power, public safety, solid waste, education, and housing.”

Mr. Potter said the governor’s call raised “serious questions about priorities and about the alignment of executive action with the everyday realities facing Virgin Islanders.”

He maintained that St. Croix’s horse-racing legacy should be honored “not by rubber stamping complex agreements in a hurried special session, but by insisting on rigorous scrutiny, balanced governance, and an unwavering focus on the most pressing needs of our people.”

Eight Senators Back Further Review

Senators Marvin Blyden, Hubert Frederick, Kenneth Gittens, Marise James, Franklin Johnson, Clifford Joseph, Milton Potter and Kurt Vialet voted to send the agreement to the Committee of the Whole.

Senators Angel Bolques Jr., Alma Francis Heyliger, Carla Joseph, Novelle Francis, Ray Fonseca and Avery Lewis opposed the motion.

Senator Dwayne DeGraff did not vote. Supporters Cite Long Wait for St. Croix Track

Lawmakers who wanted the agreement decided Tuesday argued that the territory should provide comparable horse-racing facilities in both districts.

“I don't pick sides when it comes to the Virgin Islands, and I fought vehemently to get a track for the district of St. Thomas/St. John, and I'm going to fight to get one for St. Croix, even if their own representatives don't want to do it,” Senator Alma Francis Heyliger stated.

Ms. Joseph said the territory had already waited too long to restore racing on St. Croix.

“We have delayed too long to get horse racing up in the Big Island of St. Croix. Too long,” said Senator Carla Joseph. “Southland Gaming has demonstrated they can get things done. That's not a question.”

Mr. Lewis warned that the unresolved St. Croix agreement also affected the continuation of racing on St. Thomas.

“While everybody defending St. Croix, let me tell you something. If this deal don't go through...until it's passed or whatever, it stops horse racing in St. Thomas,” Senator Avery Lewis warned.

Mr. Francis expressed frustration over the repeated delays.

“10 friggin' years we've been waiting,” the St. Croix senator declared. “St. Croix always have to be an afterthought,” he said.

Mr. Francis said he had agreed to forgo an Aug. 4 budget hearing so lawmakers could address the horse-racing proposal, only for his colleagues to schedule a hearing on the Water Island hotel development for that date.

“Again, leaving out St. Croix. Come on, man! When are we going to stand up and ask for some priority for St. Croix?”

Frederick and James Say Testimony Is Necessary

Mr. Frederick supported sending the agreement to the Committee of the Whole and rejected suggestions that lawmakers were trying to avoid deciding the issue.

“No one is dodging. Everybody wants to get this issue resolved. Next time we meet, we'll hear testimony from all sides,” he said.

Ms. James, whose father is the namesake of the Randall “Doc” James Racetrack, agreed that more review was needed.

She said her father would “probably be more interested in the hospital right now.”

Ms. James told her colleagues that she was “not ready” to decide the agreement and argued that they were also unprepared.

“you're not ready. None of you. You think you are, but you're not ready.”

She said St. Croix could wait until the August hearing.

“The people of St. Croix, good. We fine. We waited a long time, and we gonna wait another month,” she said.

Violet Calls Proposal a Gaming Bill

Mr. Violet argued that lawmakers must examine the agreement as a gaming measure rather than treating it solely as an effort to restore horse racing.

“This is a gaming bill. Don't make no mistake,” Senator Kurt Violet stated.

He alleged that “there are individuals here today who are proponents of the bill who haven't read all of the agreement.”

Mr. Violet said some supporters “have not read the U.S. Department of the Interior Office of Inspector General report from 2007 in reference to VLTs, but we saw what happened to the Housing Finance Authority when they did not read the Inspector General report.”

He criticized what he characterized as an effort to use support for horse racing to gain political favor without sufficiently examining the agreement's provisions.

“it's popular to say, ‘let's bring horse racing to St. Croix.’ Hopefully, they'll get more votes next week. But you could be so concerned about getting more votes that you're not concerned about what is included in this particular agreement.”

Mr. Violet also argued that the administration should devote similar attention to other territorial problems.

“The governor put all type of effort into this. Put the same effort into the hospital, put the same effort into crime, put the same effort into the VI Housing Finance Authority instead of calling it sensationalism,” he said.

He ultimately identified two changes that would secure his support.

“I support horse racing. Take out the exclusivity, take out the self-regulation, and you have my vote,” he said in the end.

Gittens and Blyden Decline Immediate Vote

Mr. Gittens also said senators needed additional time to understand the proposal.

“We got to read, comprehend, and understand what it is we're voting on,” Senator Kenneth Gittens said.

Mr. Blyden said he was in no “mood” to vote following the news surrounding the V.I. Housing Finance Authority.

Mr. Potter concluded that the additional review period would not cause meaningful harm to the effort to restore horse racing.

“The people of St. Croix have waited a long time. I don't believe that a couple more weeks of us vetting the bill and getting it right is going to cause any harm to horse racing,” Senator Potter said.

The eight-member majority's decision was final, leaving the agreement scheduled for testimony before the Committee of the Whole on Aug. 19 and a possible vote two days later.

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