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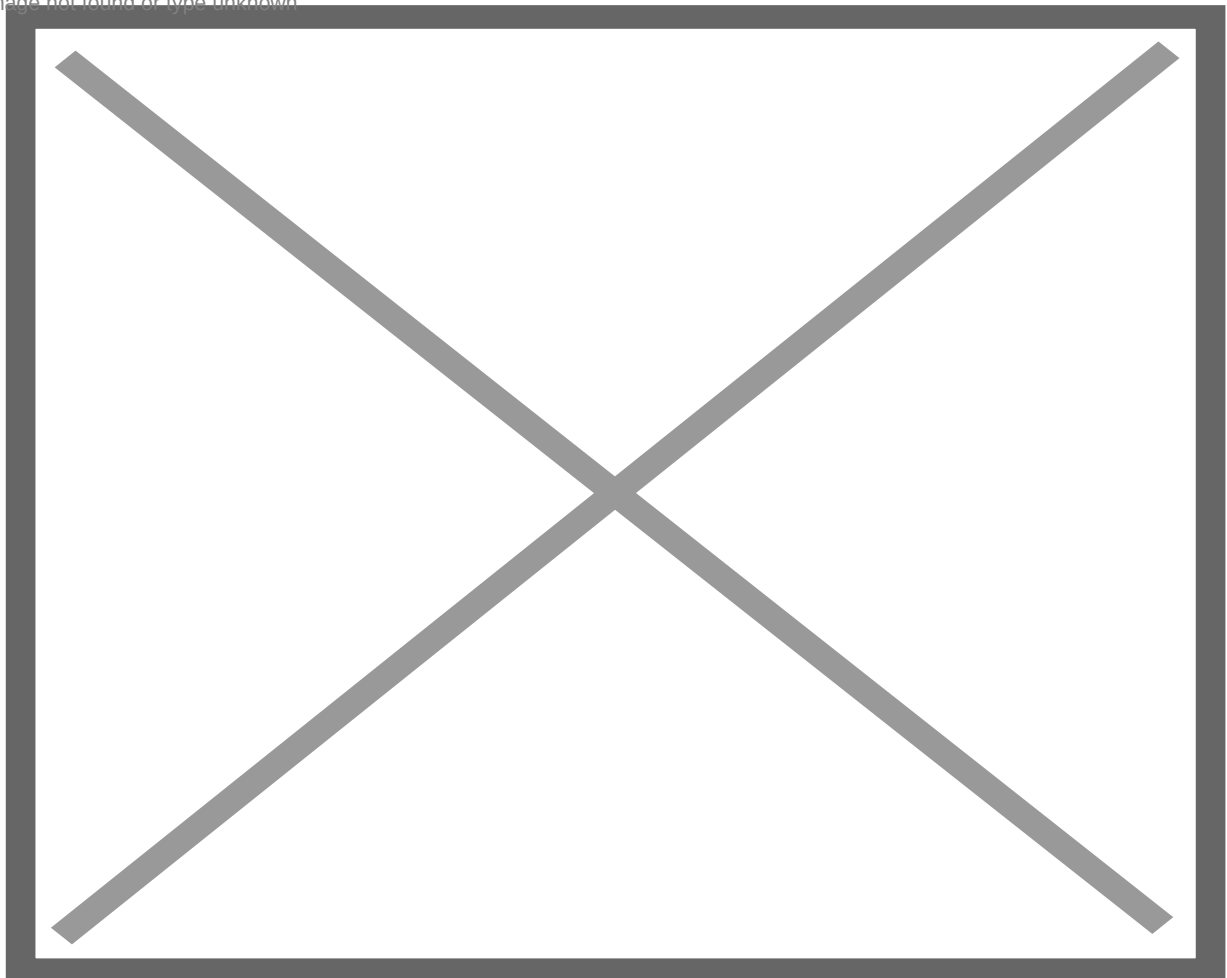
Leadership Gaps Persist at Casino Control Commission as Senators Weigh Joel Lee Nomination and VLT Expansion

With Marvin Pickering's term expired and the executive director post vacant since April, the Casino Control Commission remains under acting leadership as Joel Lee's nomination awaits review and senators scrutinize VLT expansion and a \$1.72 million budget.

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Nelcia Charlemagne **August 07, 2026**

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The Casino Control Commission's office in Orange Grove, St. Croix. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

The Virgin Islands Casino Control Commission remains without a permanent chairman and chief executive officer or an executive director months after both positions became vacant, with BIR

Director Joel Lee's nomination to lead the agency still pending before the Legislature and no timetable announced for a confirmation hearing.

Carolyn Hermon-Percell, who has served as acting chairman and CEO since former chairman Marvin Pickering's term expired in April, outlined the commission's leadership situation Wednesday while presenting its fiscal year 2027 budget request before the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance.

The commission's executive director also resigned in April, leaving a second senior leadership vacancy.

Gov. Albert Bryan Jr. nominated Lee in March to become chairman and CEO. Hermon-Percell reminded senators that his nomination remains "pending before the Legislature."

There is no indication of when the nomination will be considered by the Committee on Rules and Judiciary. Committee Chair Sen. Carla Joseph, however, raised questions about how she would proceed in light of allegations contained in a recently filed lawsuit involving Lee.

Joseph referenced the "alleged issues with the lawsuit between a taxpayer and the governor, as well as the former BIR director."

"He is the one who is nominated to fill the position of CEO and chairman, and they are saying that he may have allegedly utilized his position...as a retaliatory action against the taxpayer, and so I don't know how we're going to proceed. I don't know how we are going to act," she told Hermon-Percell.

Commission Says Operations Continue Despite Vacancies

Despite operating with one commissioner position unfilled, Hermon-Percell told Sen. Novelle Francis Jr. that the commission has "processes in place that allowed us to still ensure persons who came in for licensure could get what they needed to begin work."

The agency has also deliberately left the executive director position vacant.

Hermon-Percell said the commission favors a "collaborative effort" and has been "holding the position open" until all three commissioners are available to participate in selecting a new executive director.

Commissioner Luther Renee recently returned from an "extended sick leave."

With the permanent chairman position still vacant, the selection of an executive director may therefore remain on hold.

Sen. Marise James questioned whether waiting was the best approach for the agency.

"I understand collaboration, but I also understand efficiency of an agency to perform its work, and so I would think you would need an executive director sooner than later," she said.

Commission legal counsel Kelvin Vidal said existing staff have been able to keep the agency functioning.

Employees are "cross-trained in the day-to-day functions...and so the operations have been running smoothly since the departure of the previous executive director," he told lawmakers.

IT Position Budgeted Ahead of Internet Gaming Changes

A third vacancy is for an IT support specialist.

Hermon-Percell said the position was created in “anticipation of the Internet Gaming and Gambling Law being amended.”

Proposed amendments to that law were finalized on July 31, 2025, according to her testimony.

The commission has nevertheless included funding for the position in its fiscal year 2027 General Fund request even though there is no indication of when lawmakers will consider the proposed amendments.

“We want to keep that money in our appropriation, because the legislation can happen any time, and we want to be able to say we can hit the ground running,” Hermon-Percell told Joseph.

Joseph questioned whether the commission lacked confidence that the Legislature would appropriate the salary once the law was amended.

Hermon-Percell maintained that including the money now would “give us the ability to even act before the Legislature and the governor finalize what they have to do.”

“That's for us to contemplate as well,” Joseph responded.

Vialet Raises Concern Over VLT Expansion on St. Croix

Sen. Kurt Vialet devoted much of his questioning to the possible impact of introducing video lottery terminal machines on St. Croix outside the island's existing casinos.

Vidal told lawmakers that 294 people are employed at Divi Carina Bay Casino and Caravelle Hotel on St. Croix.

During the second quarter of 2026, those employees received a combined \$2,644,486.78 in compensation, equating to an annualized total of approximately \$10.4 million.

Vialet pointed to Southland Gaming's plans to expand its St. Croix operations and argued that lawmakers need to understand how additional gaming machines could affect existing businesses and employment.

“It's important that we study that impact,” he said.

“That's \$2.6 million every quarter that goes into the economy of St. Croix, and we need to know what is going to be the impact when you bring an entity that is going to place 200 machines at the racetrack,” Vialet said.

Hermon-Percell confirmed that Divi currently operates 247 machines, while Caravelle has 169.

“Just look at those numbers. They're actually going to be putting more machines than we have at Caravelle. That's also supporting the hotel industry,” Vialet remarked.

Commission Seeks \$1.7 Million From General Fund

The Casino Control Commission is requesting \$1,723,800 from the General Fund for fiscal year 2027.

The request covers salaries and fringe benefits for 14 filled positions and the three vacancies: chairman/CEO, executive director and IT support specialist.

Additional operating expenses are financed through the Casino Control Revolving Funds, Casino Revenue Fund and Horse Racetrack Casino Revenue Fund.

The commission has received no money from the Horse Racetrack Casino Revenue Fund since 2016 because of the closure of the Randall “Doc” James Racetrack.

Sen. Ray Fonseca also questioned why anticipated inter-island travel expenses had increased significantly compared with fiscal year 2026.

Hermon-Percell said the leadership situation is contributing to the increase.

Because commission financial policies require two authorized signatories, she said she must “come over to handle the financial matters of the Commission more often than I did because now I’m acting chairman.”