

Horsemen Back Southland Racetrack Deal, but Violet Warns No Signed Live Racing Agreement Is in Place

St. Thomas-St. John and St. Croix horsemen largely backed the Southland Gaming package, but Jay Watson warned the proposal is “a gaming bill being spun as a horse racing bill” and questioned whether it can deliver sustainable racing reform over time.

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Horsemen from St. Thomas-St. John and St. Croix largely urged lawmakers Monday to approve the proposed Southland Gaming racetrack agreement, warning that another opportunity to revive the sport could disappear without it, while another industry representative argued that the package is fundamentally a gaming measure and questioned whether it addresses the structural failures that have repeatedly undermined horse racing in the territory.

The competing positions were entered into the record during Monday's Committee of the Whole discussion of Bill 36-0313, along with complaints from some horsemen that lawmakers waited until late in the process to raise concerns about portions of the agreement. Senators pushed back, saying the Legislature has been examining the proposal for months and has a responsibility to scrutinize its provisions before voting.

Clinton Hedrington, representing the St. Thomas-St. John Horsemen Association, said members are "ready to welcome a permanent promoter on both tracks."

He said the proposed arrangement "provides a pathway for the promoter and the Horsemen Association to successfully negotiate a live racing agreement."

According to Mr. Hedrington, Southland Gaming has "formally agreed to all of our proposed terms, creating a foundation for a successful negotiation and execution of a live racing agreement."

That distinction — agreement on proposed terms but no executed live racing agreement — concerned Senator Kurt Violet.

He said he was "quite surprised that up to now, you don't have an agreement that was signed by all parties," and suggested the document should already have been prepared for consideration alongside the broader package.

"Be careful. What is written is what is complied with and followed. Don't believe nobody word," Sen. Violet cautioned.

Support from St. Croix came from Elroy Bates Jr., speaking for the Flamboyant Park Horsemen Association. He said the organization "stand ready to work alongside Southland Gaming to finally bring horse racing back to the Randall 'Doc' James Racetrack."

Mr. Bates said horsemen want a "recognized racetrack" and pointed to the inability of previous operators to maintain sustainable operations at the St. Croix facility. Although the association is "ready to move forward" with rebuilding the racetrack, he acknowledged that the horse-racing industry is "under pressure."

A racino, Mr. Bates argued, is "essential" because it could generate the "revenue necessary to support \$100,000 race-day purses, drug testing, veterinary care, and proper maintenance."

Without that additional revenue stream, he warned, "few operators will be willing to invest in or maintain a racetrack."

Mr. Bates also presented the pending legislation as potentially decisive for the future of racing on St. Croix.

If Bill 36-0313 fails, he said, "we do not know when, or even if, horse racing will return to the Randall 'Doc' James Racetrack."

Responding to Senator Novelle Francis, Mr. Bates said St. Croix horsemen are "very good" with provisions in the proposed franchise agreement dealing with purses and the transfer of a percentage of Video Lottery Terminal revenue.

But Jay Watson, chairman of the Intra Caribbean Thoroughbred Equine Association, challenged the premise that passage of the package itself would solve the industry's longstanding problems.

While stressing that he is not opposed to racing, Mr. Watson said he is "against conducting racing in a manner that has repeatedly failed over and over and over."

"The truth of the matter is, this proposal is a gaming bill being spun as a horse racing bill," he stated.

Mr. Watson said the complicated arrangement was being considered in an "overly simplistic way" and warned that it could create "chaotic situations."

Among the questions he said remain unresolved are what industry standards would be used to "benchmark conducting of racing operations, and how would this be any different from the previous franchise agreements that ultimately failed?"

He also questioned what "tangible, quantifiable benefits to the government and to the people of the Virgin Islands, and not just a select few or special interests" would result from the arrangement.

"It becomes clear that horse racing in the territory must be structured, organized, and disciplined to achieve sustainability and longevity," Mr. Watson declared.

His criticism extended beyond the pending Southland agreement to the territory's historical treatment of horse racing. He argued that the sport has "never been an economic benefit to this territory" and instead has been a "burden" on the government.

Mr. Watson advocated for a more formalized industry in which people are compensated for the work they perform.

Garrett Ritter, another testifier, agreed that reform should form the foundation of any revival.

"We have to begin with racing reform and give these horsemen the foundation that they can make a living," he said.

Mr. Hedrington and horseman Marcus Knight, however, indicated that compensation is already occurring in some areas of the industry.

Mr. Watson also questioned the argument that a racino is necessary for horse racing to survive.

"You still have race tracks throughout the United States that don't have casinos, don't have no kind of gaming legislation, and they're surviving," he stated.

The differences among horsemen emerged as supporters repeatedly warned lawmakers that the current agreement may represent the most immediate path toward getting racing underway again.

Sen. Violet nevertheless maintained that there are "portions of the agreement of the contract that needs to be renegotiated."

"It can't be just one and take it," he said.

That continued scrutiny frustrated Mr. Knight, who argued that lawmakers had earlier opportunities to raise concerns during meetings and other engagements surrounding the proposal.

He noted that the agreement has been under discussion since April and said, “The horseman went and meet with Southland Gaming, and we bargained for what we wanted.”

“Look when we want to go and bring up all this. Now, when it's supposed to go past,” Mr. Knight lamented.

Senator Marise James rejected the suggestion that lawmakers had waited irresponsibly to examine the proposal.

“I think that the young men need to understand that there's a process, and that this is not the only issue that senators deal with,” she said.

Senator Dwayne DeGraff similarly assured horsemen that the Legislature had been examining the matter.

“We all took it serious, and we all looked at all issues...We have been discussing this for months, and whether we vote against or for ain't gonna change the fact that we have been looking out for horsemen.”

Senator Milton Potter echoed that point, saying lawmakers are simultaneously responsible for numerous matters competing for their attention.

“We have a huge amount of issues that we're dealing with all at the same time, and everybody's issue is a priority issue,” he stated.

The testimony ultimately exposed a divide not simply over whether horse racing should return, but over what structure can keep it operating once it does. Supporters of the Southland arrangement see a permanent promoter, racino revenue and negotiated benefits for horsemen as the most viable path forward, while critics such as Mr. Watson argue that the territory must first address the governance, standards and economic model that contributed to earlier failures.