

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Six Passenger Exemption Joint Bill Passes House, Heads To U.S. Senate For Vote

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The Coast Guard Reauthorization Act, which includes the Virgin Islands Six Passenger exemption, recently passed the House of Representatives with an overwhelming vote of 413-3. The legislation is considered to be one of the first steps in bringing large-scale yachting back to the territory, according to a press release issued by Government House on Saturday, and now heads to the U.S. Senate for a vote next week.

A previous version of the bill passed the House in September, but the current version of H. R. 5769 is a joint effort between the House and the U.S. Senate, which will enable both chambers to vote on the same language before being signed into law by President Obama.

In 1993, a six-passenger limitation was imposed on U.S. uninspected vessels, effectively crippling the yachting industry in the territory, which reportedly brought in over \$100 million into the local economy, according to the Government House release. The imposition sent much of the industry to the BVI, which follows international standards that allow for a 12-passenger limitation.

De Jongh said the U.S. Senate's vote on the Six Passenger exemption will be an important one.

"Restoration of this important sector of our economy will offer a milieu of technical and entrepreneurial opportunities in the boating industry," he said. "This legislation is a critical first step in our journey to regain our position as the world's leader in this important industry sector. We are grateful to Chairman Shuster for working with Government House and our Marine Economic Development Council on this initiative, and thank the 416 other Members of the House of Representatives for voting to level the playing field for the territory."

The bill was authored by House Transportation Committee Chairman Bill Shuster and Coast Guard Subcommittee Chair Duncan Hunter.

During a visit to the nation's capital in September, Governor de Jongh met with Congressional leaders on other matters relevant to strengthening the territory's economy, one of which was the Virgin Islands Special Visa Waiver.

"One of the greatest obstacles to promoting our economic development is the inability of Congress to reconcile differences and legislate on important matters to the Virgin Islands that would allow us to be competitive in the Caribbean Region," de Jongh said. "The Special Visa Waiver which would allow entry for marine regattas, Caribbean sporting events, and shopping; and would allow for visitor traffic to our V.I. medical facilities such as the Virgin Islands Cardiac Center and the Kimelman Cancer Institute, all of which draw the participation of foreign visitors for a short period."

The release said current requirements for visitor visas make it prohibitive for increased participation by non-US residents.

"The Special Visa Waiver has been bogged down in Congressional Immigration Reform debate since its introduction in June of 2013 in the Wyden amendment S.A. 1308. The final disposition for the amendment will most likely be taken up when the 114th Congress convenes," the Governor said.

Image Credit: Charterworld