

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Baseball Brawl Breaks Out Over Little League Funding Bill In Senate

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ST. THOMAS – It seemed harmless enough. A bill to fund Little League baseball. Some senators even remarked that it was the kind of bill that you couldn't vote against – because it would benefit the children of the territory. But then the testimony began – and before it was all over Sen. Sammuel Sanes, the Majority Leader, called it a “cluster (pause) of confusion” and Sen. Neville James, the Senate President, called it “utter confusion.”

Sen. Myron Jackson sponsored Bill. No. 31-0098 that proposed to give \$320,000 to the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation (DSPR) as a grant to V.I. Little League, Inc. to participate in 2015 regional baseball tournaments. Steve Parris, the district

administrator for V.I. Little League Baseball testified why his organization needed the money.

Then DSPR Commissioner Pedro Cruz commented on the bill, saying: "Clearly, Little League Baseball has not treated each district equally." Parris looked dumbfounded as Cruz continued to explain that the funding proposed would only benefit the island of St. Thomas and therefore he could not support it because he was sworn to treat all the islands equal.

Tourism Commissioner designee Beverly Nicholson-Doty said the \$320,000 the bill proposed to give out of the \$19 million collected annually by the Virgin Islands government with its 10 percent hotel occupancy tax, represented about 25 percent of what her department sets aside for all event sponsorships in any given year.

Under questioning from Sen. Justin Harrigan, Sr., Parris admitted that he had not filled out a required DSPR request form to use Emile Griffith Park for a July baseball tournament that he had offered to host when Aruba no longer could. Asked by Harrigan if Parris had contacted him about using the baseball field, Cruz said: "No, I was not. At no time Mr. Parris requested to use Emile Griffith Park in July."

Sanes said: "I suggest you two start talking."

"We are listening to two different statements by two people I respect," Sanes said. "We need to do better. We really, really need to do better because this is ridiculous, this is outrageous ... today we are demonstrating how ineffective the system is."

Sen. Almando "Rocky" Liburd asked Parris how he could invite 10 teams from across the Caribbean to play in a baseball tournament at a venue he had not officially secured to use. Liburd said when St. Thomas fields two teams and St. Croix fields two teams, the best players in the territory aren't always on the team that wins the right to play in the tournament.

Sen. Nereida "Nellie" Rivera-O'Reilly asked if Virgin Islands Little League District, Inc., the organization Parris administrates, is a corporation in good standing with the Lieutenant Governor's Office. Parris replied that it was – since April 27, 2015.

But Rivera-O'Reilly showed the V.I. Consortium proof that the Lieutenant Governor's Office had determined prior to 10 days ago that it was not considered a corporation in good standing because it had failed to supply annual reports for 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013 and had failed to give financial statements for the years 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012.

Parris said "I met it that way" and that he only took over Little League Baseball in 2011, when it was consistently considered to not be a corporation in good standing with the Lieutenant Governor's Office, but that it now was in good standing thanks to his efforts.

In the end, Sen. Novelle Francis asked Nicholson-Doty if any money had been set aside this year for Little League Baseball and the commissioner said that \$125,000 was available. Sen. Janette Millin Young asked if the Senate took no action at all on Bill No. 31-0098, if Little League baseball still be funded expeditiously.

And Nicholson-Doty said Tourism would do everything that was “legally and fiscally” able to do to ensure that Little League Baseball got funding as soon as possible.

“I thought the institution with the most politics was us, but it is Little League,” Millin Young said, adding that she was floored when she saw the hefty dollar amount attached to the Little League funding bill.

Jackson offered a motion to move the bill to a vote later in the afternoon when consideration of the other bills came up, but it failed for lack of a second.

“We saw something that could only be described as utter confusion,” James said.

“I’m never surprised by the actions of this body,” Jackson countered.

After the bill failed, Jackson warned James that a similar baseball tournament was planned for St. Croix next year. James replied: “do you do,” which he said meant “do what you got to do.”

“What we had here today was a real breakdown charade,” Liburd said.