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Bryan Signs 12 Bills Into Law, Vetoes 2, Including Measure Requiring Greater Expertise on G.E.R.S. Board, Saying Bill Poorly Written

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Governor Albert Bryan on Wednesday signed 12 bills into law while vetoing two, Government House has made known.

Among the bills he signed into law is a measure to prevent underage drinking and a bill providing procedures for the use of credit cards for government purchases.

The two bills Mr. Bryan vetoed were a measure intending to require greater expertise on the board of the Government Employees Retirement System (GERS), and a bill imposing a limit on valedictorians and salutatorians.

Mr. Bryan said that despite his support of Bill No. 33-0132, which requires greater expertise on the GERS board, he had to veto the measure because it contains language that is incompatible to the bill's effectiveness and purpose.

"Once again, quick amendments and poor drafting would have resulted in conflicting clauses within the Virgin Islands Code if signed into law," Mr. Bryan wrote.

Mr. Bryan praised the 33rd Legislature for revisiting Bill No. 33-0297 – previously Bill No. 33-0069 – that he had vetoed for being "not well thought out" when it was drafted and would have required the Finance Department to oversee the government instrumentalities, although the department has no authority to do so.

"I am pleased to see that the 33rd Legislature was able to address the concerns expressed ... in the governor's veto message relating to the government credit card bill in order to pass laws that are able to be effectively implemented," Governor Bryan said in his transmittal letter to Senate President Novelle Francis Jr.

Although he approved Bill No. 33-0224, which is intended to prevent underage drinking and alcohol sales to minors, the governor said he did so with "grave reservations," because it is difficult to enforce and will not accomplish its intended goals unless it is amended and tailored to its true intent.

"I fully support the Legislature and any effort of enforcement aimed at discouraging and preventing underage drinking and the selling of alcohol to minors," Mr. Bryan wrote in the transmittal letter. "But this bill, by unclearly requiring identification checks at the door of an establishment does not address underage drinking directly."

Mr. Bryan said for the measure to be effective, the Legislature needs to make sure the bill does three things: define nightclub, bar or dance hall consistently across the statute so it makes clear which business owners must implement this rule; indicate what happens after proof of identification is furnished; and, most importantly, require proof of identification at the bar when alcohol is being purchased.

The governor also commended the 33rd Legislature for crafting Bill No. 33-0093, which establishes the St. Thomas Capital Investment Fund.

"I applaud the senators for acting together regardless of their respective districts," he wrote. "It is a significant step to repairing the divide that exists between the districts."

Other measures the Governor signed into law are:

- Bill No. 33-0097, which designates June 8 as a day honoring Euclyn "Pede" Prentice Jr. for his accomplishments in the horse racing industry and designates a public road in the John F. Kennedy Housing Community to be named after him.
- Bill No. 33-0137, which authorizes the Office of Management and Budget, the Department of Planning and Natural Resources and the Virgin Islands Economic Development Authority to create a plan to develop a sustainable blue economy in the U.S. Virgin Islands.
- Bill No. 33-0197, which authorizes the Bureau of Internal Revenue to create any and all forms necessary for the collection and filing of taxes.
- Bill No. 33-0230, which names the children's reading room at the Charles W. Turnbull Regional Library after Beulah Smith Harrigan, posthumously honoring and commending her for her role in the development of the Territory's library system.

- Bill No. 33-0244, which establishes the month of May as Virgin Islands Mental Health Awareness Month and tasking the Virgin Islands Department of Health and the Virgin Islands Department of Education with increasing mental health awareness and reducing the stigma of mental illness.
- Bill No. 33-0249, which mandates the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture and the Virgin Islands Department of Tourism to host an annual “V.I. Agricultural Caribbean Symposium.
- Bill No. 33-0273, which relates to hiring requirements in the International Financial Services sector.
- Bill No. 233-0279, which ratifies the governor’s approval of a lease agreement between the Virgin Islands Department of Property and Procurement and Caledonia Communications Corporation.
- Bill No. 33-0292, which allows for a referendum vote on convening a constitutional convention.

Governor Bryan said in his transmittal letter that he vetoed Bill No. 33-0102, which imposes a limit on valedictorians and salutatorians because “unnecessary added language” in it prohibits students who are accepted to colleges and universities outside of the U.S. Virgin Islands from receiving scholarship funds unless they attend the University of the Virgin Islands or choose a major not offered at UVI.

“I believe valedictorians and salutatorians should not be limited in any way from being rewarded for their academic excellence, and that they have the right to receive a scholarship award and use the money that they receive at any college or university that they choose to attend,” Mr. Bryan wrote in the transmittal letter. “Furthermore, given the tuition-free status of UVI for V.I. residents, scholarship use at UVI is now a nullity.”

The governor said he encourages the Legislature to rework the bill to eliminate the limitations it unnecessarily imposes.

The governor also acknowledged receipt of Resolution No. 1867 (Bill No. 33-0242) and said he lends his support in petitioning the 116th Congress to terminate the statutory cap on overall Medicaid funding to the territory.