

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp Signs Hotel Occupancy Tax Increase Into Law, Intends To Make Territory 'Center of Horse Racing In The Caribbean'

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ST. CROIX -- Governor Kenneth Mapp recently signed a bill into law that increases the territory's hotel occupancy tax from 10 percent to 12.5 percent, stating that it will help revive sports-related tourism activity in the territory.

The measure, sponsored by Senate President Neville James per the governor's request, is expected to generate an extra \$5.8 million upon the \$20 million that the tax generates annually, according to Bureau of Internal Revenue Director Marvin Pickering.

"By increasing the hotel occupancy tax, the Legislature is now providing at least \$1 million for the promotion of sports tourism related activities," Mapp wrote in a transmittal letter to James. "We will make the Virgin Islands the center of horse racing in the Caribbean, and we will expand our Paradise Jam basketball tournaments by offering monetary prizes to the winning men's and women's teams."

Mapp continued: "In addition, we are now providing monetary support to send our inter-scholastic high school teams to compete not only within the Virgin Islands, but to compete outside the Virgin Islands, in the BVI and Puerto Rico as well as host teams from those jurisdictions here."

Mapp has long held plans to bolster this island by reinvigorating its tourism product, and has singled out horse racing as one of the main attractions.

Speaking during a wide-ranging radio interview with popular personality Mario Moorehead in April, the governor said his administration was in the process of leasing the territory's horse racing facilities to a horse racing track operator from the US mainland, which includes "a complete reconstruction and build out" of both the St. Croix and St. Thomas facilities," a move that will provide much-needed jobs for those involved in the local horse racing industry, according to the territory's leader.

"In terms of driving visitation and tourism on St. Croix, we're beginning this whole process of sports and events tourism, so you're going to hear an announcement soon where we're going to be leveraging our horse racing facilities out to a horse track operator/owner," Mapp said.

The governor also made known that in the contract, the government has committed to spending \$500,000 annually over the next ten years for sponsoring ten major purses on the St. Croix and St. Thomas tracks.

However, although St. Thomas is included in the racing and events tourism layout that Mapp and his team have set forth, the focal point of said strategy will be St. Croix, he said, asserting that the island's geographical arrangement lends itself to the industry.

"The whole objective of this process is to really become the center of racing in this region, and give folks an incentive to grow and get into the racing industry in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and to have others from outside travel to the islands for the purposes of racing," Mapp said. "And clearly, given the amount of land and the way St. Croix is situated, we agree with Sen. Neville James that St. Croix should be the centerpiece of this particular strategy."

In relation to funding for the reconstruction of the facilities' infrastructure, which Mapp said will cost millions of dollars, the company that's contracted will use its own capital, the governor confirmed.

And relative to the use of illegal drugs during events, the territory's leader said there will be rigorous enforcement of the law against such activities, because "our whole plan is to drive that now as a segment of the [tourism] industry within the territory."

Following the successful implementation of the horse racing project, the governor said a new facility will be built on St. Croix to accommodate drag racing, which would further the

events tourism sector on the island.

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