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Bill to Create Office of Gun Violence Prevention Criticized, Held in Committee

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Kia Griffith **June 12, 2020**

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Senator Myron Jackson By. VI LEGISLATURE

A measure that seeks to create what is called the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, sponsored by Senator Myron Jackson and supported heavily by Governor Albert Bryan, was harshly criticized as another layer of bureaucracy, and was held in committee during a hearing in the Committee on Rules and Judiciary Thursday.

Testifying supporters of the measure did not mince words relative to what they believe was the bill's importance. "We're supposed to be America's Paradise, but for a certain demographic, it's hell," said Peter Bailey, an author, journalist, and film director of "Paradise Discovered: The Unbreakable Virgin Islands." The new program would operate through the Office of the

Governor.

Mr. Jackson, speaking on his measure, said the new office would take a comprehensive approach at reducing gun violence and gun-related homicides, and would coordinate efforts between law enforcement officers, social services agencies, victims, survivors, violence interrupters, victim advocates and faith-based organizations, among others.

But some senators were not impressed. "I remain opposed to the proposed legislation establishing an Office of Gun Violence. The simple truth is that we have various agencies already charged with the responsibilities being given to this office. Rather than creating a new level of bureaucracy, we need to insist that the agencies fulfill their mandates and do their jobs. In other words, they must be held accountable," said Senator Kenneth Gittens. Mr. Gittens, a former law enforcement officer, had motioned to kill the bill altogether, but instead the measure was tabled.

"As responsible leaders, we should recognize that we do not need a duplication of roles and costs. The Virgin Islands Government is already strained with the services it provides. And so therefore, while I remain deeply concerned about gun violence and all other violence in the territory, creating another level of bureaucracy is not the answer," Mr. Gittens added.

In defending his bill, Mr. Jackson provided two examples of investments in gun violence prevention programs that yielded results. Massachusetts, which has the lowest gun-related death rate in the US, invested \$2 million in gun violence reduction, which led to \$50 million in savings. Likewise, after Bermuda invested in gun violence prevention initiatives, they reported no homicides in 2019, the senator said.

Attorney General Denise George offered suggestions relative to the bill specifying times for data collection and analysis to determine effectivity of the plan. Ms. George also encouraged the would-be office to seek the aid of academics or researchers from UVI or other institutions of higher learning to conduct statistical data collection analysis prior to embarking on any reduction path. This type of data collection, she said, would prove effective in helping to decide on the type of intervention strategy to be used, as different types of homicides require varying intervention strategies.

Answer to whom?

Much questioning and discussion took place as to whether an intervention program of this kind should fall under the Law Enforcement Planning Commission (LEPC) or stand alone under the Office of the Governor.

The meeting also addressed the larger issue of many young men not having employment and ex-cons not having effective rehabilitation services leading to employment opportunities upon release.

"We can't get young men off the corner because we can't get them jobs," Senator Dwayne DeGraff expressed.

Solutions relative to building relations with Limetree Bay, WAPA, and nonprofits were also suggested as a means to give young men job opportunities to grow, support their families, and not express their desperation and pain out on fellow members of their community.

The other bills brought to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary and the resolutions of each are as follows:

Bill No. 33-0054, an Act amending Title 11, VI Code, Chapter 23 pertaining to Small Business Development as well as Bill No. 33-0106, an Act amending Title 6 of the VI Code, by adding a new Chapter 11 prohibiting various uses of unmanned aircrafts, also known as drones were both favorably approved by the committee.

Bill 33-0105 was removed from the agenda as more concerns were raised by stakeholders, so that the sponsors of the Bill may confer with the Commissioner of the Dept. of Planning and Natural Resources to receive and include his additional comments.

Senator Barnes spoke to Bill 33-0250, an Act amending Title 3, Chapter 9, Section 134a, subsection (b) of the Virgin Islands code and it was moved to be held in committee for further amendment. Ms. Barnes stated that this Bill is significant because it will ensure that there is front-end engineering and design done prior to going out to bid for the procurement of capital projects, as the USVI embarks on rebuilding, to include hospitals and schools. Front-end engineering and design is a new model in capital construction that will provide appropriate cost estimates.

Bill No. 33-0217, an Act authorizing the Department of Property and Procurement in conjunction with other agencies to refurbish the building located at No. 1 Norre Gade on the island of St. Thomas and convert it into public restrooms to be used by the public, including tourists was favorably approved by the committee and forwarded to the full body for further consideration. This motion came as a relief to Senator Stedmann Hodge, who said that a public facility had not been built in downtown Charlotte Amalie for years.