

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Controversial Medical Marijuana Bill Placed On Hold

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ST. THOMAS -- The writing was on the wall [following the first hearing](#) on the medical marijuana bill in the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services in St. Croix on Friday. On Monday, at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall, no action was taken on the measure as it was held in committee, with senators citing multiple problems with the way the bill was written -- mirroring concerns raised during the first hearing.

Yesterday's hearing, however, took on a higher level of animation as emotions ran high at multiple points, forcing the committee's chairman, Senator Kurt Violet, to stop for recess.

New testifiers along with some who spoke on Friday were on hand to share their knowledge. And an impassioned testimony was placed on record by Barbara LaRonde, a member of the USVI NORML organization, who spoke of her children's constant suffering with various illnesses that she says are curable by marijuana. She paused at many points, attempting to hold back tears that flowed anyway. But her testimony, nearing its end, was interrupted by Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, whose passion was visible but her words inaudible because she was not near a mic -- forcing Mr. Violet to pause for recess.

For anybody to come to the Legislature and believe that a medicinal marijuana bill would successful pass in two days, that's naive. - Kurt Violet

Earlier, Mr. Violet had called a recess following a back-and-forth between himself and Senator Positive Nelson, the bill's sponsor. Mr. Nelson had spoken out of turn on numerous occasions yesterday, a testament to the fervid nature of the marijuana debate and the controversy surrounding the bill.

Yet, with all the testimonies, emotions and sometimes desperate plea for action on the measure, legislators were unanimous on one thing: the bill needed a lot of work. That consensus was magnified when it was said that 20 amendments were already introduced and much more were to come.

Senators took issue with the bill's seeming tilt towards full legalization of marijuana. They held issue with allowing patients to have the ability to grow 16 plants in the privacy of their homes with the option to sell the excess. They disagreed on what was deemed as the medical tourism benefits of the bill, and expressed concern that the measure could do more damage than good in its current form.

The senators believe, however, that some form of medical marijuana being legal in the territory is inevitable, and some noted that the subject would not go away until action is taken.

"This marijuana situation, whether it's medical marijuana [or] legalization, it's not going to go away, whether it's from the current bill's sponsor or future bill sponsors, it's something that is going to continue to come before this legislature time and time again," said Senator Novelle Francis. "So we'll have to take the opportunity to address it one way or the other." He said language must be included to protect the territory's youth, contending that the current bill was not adequate.

Senator Almando Liburd chimed in: "If there's something that can help mankind, medicinal marijuana, I believe we ought to make it happen. But I think we get caught sometimes because that's not the issue; people want to do more than that. People want to make medicinal marijuana and want to say it's free to go all over the place. And I think that's the problem."

Senator Justin Harrigan added his thoughts: "I was particularly concerned where it talked about the selling of excess growth of the plants. Again, how do you control that." Mr. Harrigan said he's seen documentaries about marijuana and revealed that one of his children suffered with epilepsy. "So I know there's probably some usage beneficial to illnesses. But this bill cannot, in its current form, get to that level where I could support it."

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly did not agree that marijuana should be legal at all and pointed to the federal ban on the controlled substance.

Mr. Violet's remarks to close out the hearing brought to the fore the difficulty in approving such measures, and the length of time it could take before a final version is supported by the full Senate.

"For anybody to come to the legislature and believe that a medicinal marijuana bill would successfully pass in two days, that's naive, said Mr. Violet. "Because this type of legislation has taken months and years to amend to the version that you want to move forward with.

"But to think that you're going to have testimony on Friday, and then you're just going to go back and whip up some amendments; you're going to offer the amendments right after the weekend, get [them] on the floor on a bill that is impactful as this -- you're just going to look at the amendments and say, 'vote it up,' -- that I can't understand.

"I listened keenly to how long it's taking Florida to get their bill right. But a lot of people felt that you could just come to the Virgin Islands, you could bring a bill, and everybody will just say, 'yes, we want it.' Because the premise that you're using is fifty-something percent of the population voted for it so you must vote for it. But we have to be responsible as legislators.

"And if you can't be patient for bills to be drafted and corrected, then don't bring controversial bills. Don't bring bills that you know is going to have a lot of controversy," Mr. Violet said.

The freshman Democrat rebuked Mr. Nelson one last time, who had again interrupted the committee's chairman during his closing remarks. "You are out of order," he told Mr. Nelson.

"It's not going to be an easy process," Mr. Violet went on, adding with emphasis, "It needs to be vetted properly, amended properly, researched properly and not rushed."