

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp's Horse Racing Proposal, Now Facing Stiff Opposition, To Be Heard At Senate Today

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ST. THOMAS -- The Mapp administration's horse racing agreement with VIGL Operations, LLC, worth some \$27 million for the reconstruction of the horse racing facilities on this island and St. Croix -- which the administration, along with VIGL promise will revitalize the ailing industry in the territory -- will be taken up by the 31st Legislature today during a Committee of the Whole meeting.

When first announced, there was a chorus of praise for the proposal, with Senate President Neville James [lauding the governor's efforts](#).

“As a lifelong horse racing fan, it was a pleasure to hear Governor Mapp cover all of the aspects of the industry when making details of the agreement available for public consideration. People tend to focus on the dollars associated with horse racing, but the governor’s desire to implement anti-doping mandates is what makes this initiative attractive to me,” Mr. James said. “Drug-free and sound horses are important variables that allow for any horse racing circuit with designs on promoting a fan desirable product, to be attractive.”

But the proposal has since faced opposition from Southland Gaming Chief Operating Officer Shaine Gaspard, who shared a [letter](#) with The Consortium that the company addressed to Mr. James, that relayed a view contrary to the governor’s claims that agreement had seen no opposition.

Southland Gaming, which has a popular video lottery operation in St. Thomas with hundreds of machines at various locations, fears that the government’s new deal with VIGL — which recommends 200 slot machines at the proposed facility at the Clinton Phipps Racetrack — would greatly damage its current operation.

“That is over double the amount of video lottery terminals in any other location in St. Thomas and represents about one-third of all VLTs everywhere else in St. Thomas,” wrote Robert E. Huckabee, III, Southland Gaming’s CEO. Mr. Huckabee contends that any money spent at the proposed racetrack with its 200 slot machines, “would have been money spent anyway somewhere else on St. Thomas.” He also contended that taking millions of dollars away from the current video lottery business, which he assumes would happen if the VIGL deal were to go through as proposed, “will cripple the successful video lottery program, bankrupt the Lottery itself, and cost nearly 700 hundred jobs.” Mr. Huckabee did not substantiate his claims, however.

And in a [letter](#) dated October 26, 2016, addressed to Governor Kenneth Mapp from “concerned horse owners”, the group said they were in opposition of the new measure; they favored instead Southland Gaming’s plan to install 200 video slot machines at the racetrack in St. Thomas, which they claim would generate “immediate and significant revenue for that track.”

The opposition the bill now faces has the potential to upend at least the St. Thomas portion of Mr. Mapp’s agreement with VIGL, which was detailed in full at the [October press conference](#). Discussions The Consortium has had with lawmakers indicated then a small majority in favor of the bill. But with lobbying efforts ongoing, it remains to be seen where senators stand during today’s meeting.