The Virgin Islands Consortium

With Senate Approval Of Territorial Horse Racing Commission And Anti-Doping Bills, Horse Racing Agreement Gets Closer To Reality

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ST. Thomas -- A deal brokered between the Government of the Virgin Islands and St. Croix-based hotel and casino operator, VIGL, to transform horse racing in the territory came one step closer to reality following Senate approval on Friday of a territorial horse racing commission bill and a measure implementing anti-doping rules.

The agreement, which sees VIGL spending $30 million of its own funds to build modern state-of-the-art racetracks and related facilities on both St. Thomas and St. Croix, also includes increased purses and a number of other implementations aimed at making horse racing in the USVI a viable industry.

But lawmakers had struggled with the territorial commission, which was part of the original agreement but was removed during Senate deliberations. There were also concerns about the language of the original anti-doping measure.

The commission will include 9 members, with 8 representing St. Croix, 8 representing St. Thomas and St. John, and the ninth member being the Sports, Parks and Recreation commissioner, according to Bill No. 32-0092. The second mesure, Bill No. 32-0093 introduces anti-doping laws to the industry.

Both measures were sent to the Legislature by the Mapp administration, and government officials have testified multiple times for their passage. “The widespread use of performance-enhancing drugs in horses threatens the viability, safety and integrity of the sport, especially the threat to the safety and well-being of the jockey,” said Attorney General Claude Walker during a Committee on Rules and Judiciary hearing in June. He later added, “Aside from the health and safety of the horses, there remains the issue of the public’s perception of a sport that routinely uses drugs as a tool to gain a competitive edge.”

“Doping and the indiscriminate or inappropriate use of medications are detrimental not only to the integrity of the sport but also to the health, welfare, and safety of the racehorses, who cannot refuse such maltreatment, and the jockeys who ride them,” said Attorney Teri Griffiths, who drafted the first anti-doping measure on behalf of the Mapp administration.

The bill also creates the Horse Racetrack Casino Revenue Fund, which divvies up the monies to promote a number of horse racing-related initiatives, as well as other important causes.

They include: 50 percent to the Casino Revenue Fund; 30 percent of the funds to be split between the St. Thomas-St. John and St. Croix horse owners associations; 3 percent for hospitality training on St. Croix; 3 percent for the promotion of thoroughbred horse racing; 2.75 percent for St. Croix horse owners association to be used for the transportation of horse jockeys; 3.5 percent for the Agriculture Revolving Fund; 3 percent for the Virgin Islands Olympic Committee; 1.75 percent for the St. Thomas horse owners association; and 2 percent for a fund to treat injured or infirm horses at the Dept. of Agriculture.

An amendment by Senators Tregenza Roach and Dwayne DeGraff secured 5 percent of the monies to go towards a fund for the maintenance of parks territory-wide.