

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp Signs Into Law 15 Bills, Including Measure Aimed At Quelling Rise Of Gang Activity In Territory

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ST. THOMAS -- Governor Kenneth Mapp on Tuesday took action on 19 measures, signing 15 into law, vetoing three, and recognizing one resolution. Among the measures signed into law was a Senator Sammuel Sanes-sponsored legislation aimed at stalling the rise of gangs in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Bill No. 32-0030, which was crafted with St. John in mind, an island that has multiple villas and resorts, and where property taxes could increase beyond what local St. Johnians can afford.

Mr. Mapp signed into law Bill No. 32-0130, which toughens criminal penalties against gang members for gang-related activities and establishes the Crime and Gang Prevention Fund. The bill aligns the Virgin Islands with other states that have enacted

anti-gang statutes. It is hoped that the stiffer penalties imposed by this legislation will assist in deterring gang related crimes in the territory.

The territory's leader approved a measure that will provide some property tax relief, particularly to residents of St. John, by creating a "circuit breaker" system to prevent real estate owners from being overburdened by property taxes. Bill No. 32-0030 also amends the definition of commercial property to include apartments with five or more units and grants the Tax Assessor's authority to offer tax credits to property owners in the Charlotte Amalie historic district.

But the governor vetoed a Kurt Violet-sponsored measure, [Bill No. 32-0175](#), that Mr. Mapp said would allow tax breaks to be extended for ten additional years without the approval of the Economic Development Commission nor the governor.

"Dangerous and concerning is Section 4 of the bill, the Legislature proposes to, by Legislative fiat grant 10-year extension of benefits at 100 percent of benefits to existing beneficiaries without the current statute's (29 V.I.C. §713a(b)(5)) requirement that the Commission recommend such an extension and approval of the governor and without a public hearing. My friends, we do not want to do this," the governor wrote in his letter to Senate President Myron Jackson. "Additionally, Section 5 of the bill allows EDC applicants to apply the tax benefits granted to a date of its choosing even if the applicant does not have a business license in place – only that it has been applied for by the applicant – and regardless whether the applicant has paid taxes or other fees to the government it owes."

The bill was birthed following concerns by some senators that the current law left too much power to the governor; a similar measure also sponsored by Mr. Violet [was already vetoed by Mr. Mapp](#). In June of 2017, Mr. Mapp had vetoed 11 of 41 EDC applicants, and stated that he was happy to do so. "There's this misperception that whoever applies for benefits will simply get them," Mr. Mapp said last year.

But some lawmakers were not in agreement with the governor's stance. Mr. Violet has argued that the governor does not need to be in the process of approving E.D.C. benefits, given through the E.D.A., as it slows down application time. The Senate has the power to override the governor's veto with two-thirds of the body.

The territory's chief executive also vetoed Bill No. 32-0147, which primarily relates to the practice of telemedicine. Mr. Mapp said he supported residents' expanded access to telemedicine, however, the bill before him had major flaws including reducing gross receipt taxes for some physicians from 5 to 2.5 percent. The governor said the territory could not justify diminishing its revenue base while at the same time drawing down on much needed funds from the territory's recently authorized Community Disaster Loan.

"How do we continue to justify accessing these funds while at the same time reducing our revenue base?" Mr. Mapp asked.

Several Coastal Zone permits, rezonings and land use variances were also approved by the governor on Tuesday, according to Government House. The permits ratified by Mr. Mapp included a dock in Fish Bay, St. John and the continued operation of the reverse osmosis plant at Mahogany Run. See all actions taken [here](#).

