

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Lambaste Racing Commission Chairman, Slams Commission For Being Unorganized

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The Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks and Recreation met on Tuesday at the Governor Juan F. Luis (J.F.L.) to discuss the current status on the VI Horse Racing Commission and get a progress report that includes any agreements made that would impact the sport of horse racing in the territory.

In attendance to testify was Jay Watson, chairman of the Virgin Islands Horse Racing Commission; Mr. Henry Schjang, Dr. Laura Palminteri, and Mr. Sheldon Turnbull, board members of Virgin Islands Horse Racing Commission.

During the hearing, Mr. Watson addressed the horse racing commission's needs that he said would enable it to carry out the mandate as a regulatory body, and the reforms necessary to improve horse racing in the Virgin Islands from a casual sport to a significant, economically-thriving entity.

Sheldon Turnbull began his testimony by declaring that the V.I. Horse Racing Commission can be described as "dysfunctional." The commission was formed in November of 2018, he said. He expressed grave displeasure with Mr. Watson's move to introduce a measure to remove Dr. Laura Palminteri as chairperson and have himself installed in December 2018. Mr. Watson, he said, has held press conferences without including the St. Thomas/St. John members. Mr. Turnbull's take is that Mr. Watson is acting unilaterally as an agent of the V.I. Horse Racing Commission, has expressed a lack of care for horse owners, and refers to St. Thomas and Tortola members as "you guys," showing a complete lack of respect for the St. Thomas/St. John district.

As testimony and questioning began, Mr. Watson quickly came under fire as Senator Kenneth L. Gittens expressed disappointment in his presentation, calling it "baseless," and also in his handling of the V.I. Horse Racing Commission's affairs. Mr. Gittens said the presentation lacked information of the commission's current status and felt there was a major communication issue concerning the commissioner's negation of the other member's involvement and sabotage of the other members involvement. He felt that it was time for unification with the main focus to develop the horse racing industry in the Virgin Islands. Mr. Gittens questioned the lack of anti-doping regulations and inferred that it was a result of the commission's inability to work together. His questioning led to the disclosure that Mr. Watson, by his own testimony, had not taken the time to review agreements from 2017 to date.

Senator Novelle Francis also expressed displeasure with the lack of favorable responses from Mr. Watson concerning the commission's current status. "When elephants fight, the grass gets trampled," he said. Mr. Francis notes that VIGL Operations, LLC is most likely displeased with the commission's current status, or lack thereof, as well, as the company hopes to invest \$27 million into the territory, [based on its 2016 agreement with the Government of the Virgin Islands](#). Mr. Francis asked Mr. Watson how many times the commission had met, and Mr. Watson's response was twice, officially. It seemed that not very much had been accomplished in the two meetings.

Senator DeGraff asked Mr. Watson how many members were a part of the commission, and what the total complement should be. Mr. Watson explained that the total complement should be 4 members from St. Croix, 4 members from St. Thomas/St. John district, and the ex-officio. He also asked what constituted a quorum, to which the commissioner replied, "two members from St. Croix and two members from St. Thomas/St. John district." When questioned by Mr. DeGraff, instead of answering directly, Mr. Watson resorted to issuing excuses and was challenged with clearly stating actual attainable goals.

Ms. Palminteri, when asked by Senator Athneil Thomas about the status of the commission in December of 2018, was able, without hesitation, to give a clear status update of the period in question. Mr. Thomas also expressed disappointment with Mr. Watson's performance.

Senator Alicia Barnes stated that the racing commission should be able to make its own assessment of the current status of the commission without bringing an outside entity from as far as Canada to do so. However, Mr. Watson said that an outside entity is required. She said that she finds his posture before the legislative body offensive and takes exception to the way he is interacting with members of the body. His posture, she expressed, was condescending and reeked of unilateral governance.

While members of the legislature, one after another, levied clear displeasure with the commissioner's performance since installed as the chair, it appeared that their intent may not have been to publicly embarrass him but to hold him to a higher standard with a clear expectation that he would fulfill, with excellence, the duties that are required of the V.I. Horse Racing Commission Chair. Senator Kurt Vialet expressed that it was time to take action, and Ms. Barnes stated that she perceives a total communication breakdown and that it was time for all stakeholders to meet and be on the same sheet of music, including VIGL, the racing commission, and the horsemen of the territory, to discuss moving forward with the recommencement of live horse racing in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Feature Image: Ray Watson, courtesy VI Legislature.