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New Bill to Halt Development of Gas Stations in U.S. Virgin Islands for 5 Years Crosses First Hurdle

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Legislation sponsored by Senators Janelle Sarauw and Kenneth Gittens that seeks to limit the development of gas stations in a territory replete with them crossed the first hurdle when it won the approval of lawmakers Friday during a Committee on Government Operations, Consumer Affairs, Energy, Environment and Planning hearing.

In simple terms, the measure places a five-year moratorium on gas station development in the towns of Christiansted and Frederiksted on St. Croix, and the St. Thomas-St. John District. It also establishes a numerical system that determines how many gas stations will be allowed after the five-year moratorium.

The Department of Planning and Natural Resources plays a key role in permitting and regulating underground storage facilities. The department's assistant commissioner, Keith Richards, said Friday that D.P.N.R. could help the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs in gathering the needed information and processing of zoning reviews for gas station business licenses.

Currently, there are 52 retail gas stations territory-wide, according to D.P.N.R.: 26 on St. Croix, 23 on St. Thomas and 3 on St. John.

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In 2019 D.P.N.R.'s Division of Comprehensive and Coastal Zone Planning conducted a location survey of gas stations to determine their proximity to each other. "This survey revealed 75 percent of gas stations surveyed are less than one mile from another," said Mr. Richards. "The survey also revealed that on St. Croix, the stations are mostly found along Centerline Road and Northshore Road, and on St. Thomas, the stations are mostly found along Veteran's Drive, Weymouth Rhymer Highway, Bovoni Road, and Redhook Road."

One of the bill's chief sponsors, Ms. Sarauw, told the Consortium that "an excessive amount of new gas stations in both districts has continued to not only put our environmental and physical health at risk, but it has caused an overpopulation of gas stations within the territory."

Senator Alicia Barnes, chair of the committee in which the measure was heard Friday, said, "We have finite land and water resources and we have to curtail the proliferation of gas stations in our territory. Let us not expand the footprint of these gas station."

The measure does not seek to revoke licenses of current gas stations, and the moratorium, which is set to take effect January 1, 2021, lasts through 2026, upon which time licenses that follow will be reviewed and determined using the numerical system established through the would-be law.

D.P.N.R. cautioned lawmakers to tread lightly with the measure, as moratoriums are for a short period of time tied to a direct threat to public health, safety and general welfare. "There is concern with the effective start date of the moratorium as it will have to be adequately advertised for those stations that are currently in permitting and construction phases, so that they can ensure they are licensed prior to the moratorium's effect," Mr. Richards said.

The measure will move to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, chaired by Ms. Sarauw, then to the floor for a full vote before heading to the desk of Governor Bryan.