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# 'Bush Racing' Bill Passes Youth, Sports, Parks and Recreation Committee, Inching Closer to Legalization

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A bill sponsored by Senator Kurt Vialet which authorizes the government to set aside land for a "bush track" for horse racing on St. Croix, recently passed in the Committee of Youth, Sports, Parks, and Recreation.

The move by Mr. Vialet follows a controversy sparked by the destruction of a bush track on St. Croix by the Bryan administration, which led to widespread community outrage and [a protest](#) by horsemen who interrupted a food sale Senator Kenneth Gittens was hosting to express their frustration.

Some senators along with testifiers from the Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation, the V.I. Horse Racing Commission and Flamboyant Horsemen Association conveyed their concerns with

the measure, [Bill No 33-0371](#), which also authorizes DSPR to issue a license to the Flamboyant Horsemen Association to operate the bush track.

When Dennis Lynch, the testifier representing the Flamboyant Horseman Association — which is responsible for both thoroughbred and non-thoroughbred horse racing on St. Croix — was asked to give his testimony on the proposed bill, he said, "The association will abstain from any inquisition dealing with the bill." Mr. Violet was shocked by Flamboyant's position at the hearing. "I am a bit surprised that today when we have the forum that there is so much silence, and when we don't have the forum, on a regular basis, there has been so much outcry."

Sports, Parks and Recreation Commissioner, Calvert White, did not refrain from expressing his concerns with the measure. "I do not support this bill as written as putting bush racing under the DSPR." He said that there were more questions than answers surrounding the bill and that it puts DSPR in an uncomfortable position. "The language of the proposed legislation puts the commissioner of DSPR in a conflicting situation. The commissioner of DSPR is the ex-officio and a voting member of the V.I. Horse Racing Commission which is the board that governs and sanctions horse racing in the Virgin Islands," Mr. White said.

He elaborated that the proposed bill creates two different sets of rules under the same department for the same sport, which he said will cause DSPR to be legally liable and mandated to provide licenses for the sport with no real oversight. It would also make the government legally responsible since it would, under the would-be law, own the track, Mr. White contended.

Senator Dwayne DeGraff agreed with Mr. White's concerns surrounding the government being legally liable for the track. "The horsemen deserve an outlet, but to obligate the government for 7 acres of land basically where we don't regulate it, but we hold liability, even when the horsemen hold liability insurance for the races" is cause for review, argued the senator. "The liability to the government that [may not be seen] is what I have an issue with at this time," he added.

Mr. Violet chimed in, "This bill isn't permanent," he said, adding that when the Flamboyant Horseman Association reopens the track at the Randall "Doc" James facility, "this is over because there will be a venue for non-thoroughbred to race."

While some senators see the bill's potential passage as a future problem for the government, others see it as a solution to combat crime and an excellent opportunity to teach those interested in horseracing how to ride. Senator Janelle Sarauw said, "Before you get to Nascar and the Indy 500, you learn to drive on the drag strip. What is the beginning stage for horse racing in the V.I? The bush bace."

Ms. Sarauw indicated that before tearing down the Williams Delight Downs track, St. Croix did not have the level of crime the island has witnessed in recent times. "If we are going to curve crime, we have to be creative and create opportunities," she said. "Our young people who participate in horserace deserve the right to start someplace."

Senators Steven Payne and Marvin Blyden both commended Mr. Violet for sponsoring the measure. "I am definitely in support of this measure on behalf of the horsemen and our young people," he said. "I do not believe 7 acres is too much for our horseracing community. We have a director of Bureau of Corrections looking for millions [to build an additional 400 cells](#) in our prisons to lock up our young people like a bunch of animals."

"The sponsor of this bill saw a need and tried to bring forth a solution to the problem," said Mr. Blyden, adding that the bush track's purpose would assist in keeping young men active and

involved.

The bill authorizes the government to designate 7 acres of government-owned real property for an interim bush track and for DSPR to issue a license to the Flamboyant Horsemen Association to operate it. The association, according to the measure, must also comply with all applicable law, including title 32, chapter 10. Furthermore, the association shall purchase and maintain liability insurance, including coverage for bodily injury, death to persons, and property damage, in an amount determined by DSPR and naming the government as an additional insured. The measure also exempts bush track horse racing from regulation by the Virgin Islands Horse Racing Commission and from the requirements of Title 32 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 11.

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