

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Proposed Legislation Aimed at Changing Declaration of Firearms Blasted By Senate Body

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The Committee of the Whole heard testimony from the Virgin Islands Police Department Police Commissioner, Trevor A. Velinor, on proposed legislation aimed at changing the process that guns are declared as they enter the territory . According to Mr. Velinor's testimony this legislation is a response to the essential need of ensuring proper measures for gun safety, relative to their storage, provides guidance on the protocol for declaring firearms upon arrival to the territory and the release of firearms upon departure, and identifies specific states for reciprocal recognition based upon the similar requirements of licensure. Many members of the Legislature did not see it this way but more as an invitation for visitors to bring guns into the territory.

This proposed legislation is worded as followed: "An Act amending Title 23, chapter 5, sections 460, 470, 471, and 489a of the Virgin Islands Code to provide for better licensing, safety, and declaration process for firearms ammunition entering and being used in the Virgin Islands by clarifying the following: reciprocity provisions and what out-of-state licensees need to do for licensure, the reporting and declaration requirements for firearms brought into the Virgin Islands, and safe storage requirements when traveling into the Territory by residents and visitors alike.

In his testimony Mr. Velinor stated "The Virgin Islands will honor conceal carry licenses to persons licensed in states with similar licensing requirements as in the Virgin Islands and will recognize licenses for the following states: Tennessee, Massachusetts, Alaska, Arkansas, Arizona, Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, South Dakota, Virginia, and Wisconsin for a period of ninety (90) days. These requirements include having a comprehensive firearms licensing course, background investigation (to include fingerprint and photo), and the individual must be at least 21 years old." additionally "The applicants, however, are still required to follow the Territory's processes for formal recognition which includes the submission of an application and payment of a twenty-five (\$25.00) dollar fee. Penalty for non-compliance is established in the Virgin Islands Code."

Senator Novelle Francis asked why this states were selected and Mr. Velinor stated that they had similar requirements for firearms. Even in the states that are approved that the age requirement is 18, the individual must still be 21 to carry in the Virgin Islands.

This Legislation did not sit well with senators as many of them felt that this would just open the floodgates and encourage visitors to bring down firearms. Senators Alma Francis Heyliger questioned the purpose of the bill and Senator Dwayne Degraff and asked why do we need to change the current process?

Mr. Velinor stated that this would limit the number of states that the Virgin Islands allow to issue a 90 day permit for just states with similar requirements for obtaining a firearms.

Senator Marvin Blyden disputed that the approved states have a similar process to getting their gun license. "The states that you listed in the bill all have significantly less requirements than we have here in the territory."

He asked if Mr. Velinor was aware of states listed that did not require firearm handling and safety courses, which the commissioner stated he was aware of. He asked if there were states that require the applicant to have good reason to fear death or great injury to the person or property or any other reason to carry a firearm and provide an affidavit of two people to back up their request like in the Virgin Islands. Mr. Velinor did not know and Blyden stated that none of the states do.

Ultimately Blyden felt “You are giving individuals leeway and access to us here in territory where they can carry a firearm.” and “You are giving them more authority than our local people here in the territory.”

Senator Kurt Violet said that there were some positives in the bill like gun storage and reporting of lost weapons “Section 1 got to go, matter of fact I really think that Title 23 Chapter 5 Section 460 need to be repealed in its entirety.”

He was suspect of the reasoning behind the bill. “This bill smells like special interest. This bill was crafted by whoever made a request to be able to come to the Virgin Islands with their guns.” and “we don’t want any infusion of firearms coming into this territory.”

Senator Janelle Sarauw said the legislation could go in trash and that there was a lack of data presented in the testimony. One of the questions that she asked the police commissioner was if he knew how many legal guns came to the territory which he didn’t.

In her closing remarks she said “We have to step up the standards, these legislations that have no data, no information, no data can not continue to proceed.”

Senator Frankie Johnson “I just can not support this measure when the time comes, we are trying to control weapons in our territory but yet we are going to allow folks from more states to come through here, and we are not even talking law enforcement, we are talking about civilians.” and “I don’t really understand what we are trying to achieve here if we are trying to get guns off the street, but yet we are now opening up our doors for more guns to come in here, so please tell me what we are trying to achieve with this, we cannot control what’s going on here right now.”

Mr. Velinor stated that “Currently there are states that have similar or same requirements as set forth if those individuals come here they should have their right to bear those firearms as long as there is a fact a license in their respective state, all we are trying to

do is identify which states they are, currently are statutes is very broad and we are trying to identify specifically instead of saying all 50 states which it is not, we identified those 16 or so states as of this moments that are consistent with ours. So we are saying anyone that brings a firearm in from other than these states whether they have a concealed weapon permit or not they will be able to possess a firearm here in our territory.

Ms. Frett- Gregory said in her closing remarks "Don't bring your guns here, that's what we should be telling folk until we get a handle on the gun situation we have here in the Virgin Islands. Why are we opening the door?"

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