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Senators Blast Bryan's Gun Control at Ports Proposal as Having the Opposite Effect; Bryan Responds

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Senators who make up the 34th Legislature had a lot to say on Thursday about a proposal from Governor Albert Bryan that seeks to better track and control firearms coming into the territory through the ports. At the crux of the criticism, lawmakers panned the reciprocity the bill seeks with some 21 states, meaning gun owners from those states, whose gun laws are to be selfsame, similar, or stricter than the USVI's, through the proposal would have certain benefits. Among them, a 90-day temporary license to carry a firearm in the territory and removal of a current fingerprinting process used to determine authenticity. The local government would see some benefits, too, including a 24-hour notification of persons coming into the territory with firearms from those states, which would make weapons declaration more efficient and more effective, proponents argue.

To understand the need for a revamp of the current law, or repeal and rewrite altogether, the system currently in place is a hodgepodge of standards that have proven ineffective throughout the years. For example, gun owners who fly into the territory don't declare their firearms most of the times. And whether those firearms leave with their owners is anyone's guess. According to Senator Novelle Francis, who spoke to the Consortium Friday morning, the process is supposed to work as follows: a firearm owner enters the USVI, upon arrival, the weapon is then declared to the V.I.P.D., which in turn provides a temporary license. But Mr. Francis, a former police chief and police commissioner, said this rarely occurs, and firearm owners who do not declare upon arrival usually have a hard time when leaving the territory with their weapon. He said the V.I.P.D. oftentimes holds onto the gun until verification is cleared.

Enter the Bryan administration's measure. The proposal, which was heard during a Committee of the Whole meeting Thursday, seeks to amend V.I. 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."

"We're clarifying the existing law to make it better," Governor Bryan said to the Consortium Friday morning. He said his team went through the entire law before coming up with the proposal, though he welcomed changes. "The Senate's job is to write the law, not me. We're just seeing things that need to be changed, we're presenting it to them, if you have a problem with it you have the power to change it. Why are you [chastising] our people just telling you what they think is the best way to do it. You don't agree just change it," Mr. Bryan said.

Senators were harsh with their criticism of the bill. Sen. Janelle Sarauw said it should be trashed; Sen. Kurt Vialet said it appears to have been written with special interest in mind; other lawmakers questioned whether the testifiers had done due diligence.

The criticism was warranted, said the lawmakers, because the proposal includes certain states for reciprocity with some of the most liberal gun laws. Some of the states in the proposal include Tennessee, Massachusetts, Alaska, Arkansas, Arizona, Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, South Dakota, Virginia, and Wisconsin, among others. To put in perspective senators' concerns, the Bryan administration's list includes three states — Alaska, Arizona and Kansas — said to have some of the most gun-friendly laws in the U.S. by multiple sources. See [here](#) and [here](#).

"It's basically a reciprocity legislation, but this legislation is also offering reciprocity to those states who have the least restrictive gun laws, which is very troubling to me as a senator," said Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory to the Consortium Friday morning. "I took some time to do some research on it and I looked at the states that we were considering this reciprocity relationship with, and many of those states are the most gun-friendly states. They don't have tight regulations. They are like NRA states if you will. That in itself is a serious red flag. Just this morning I woke up and I noticed that [Indianapolis had someone that killed eight people](#). You can't just have people coming in here [with weapons.] These requirements don't look the same as our requirements."

Ms. Frett-Gregory questioned whether the administration performed due diligence based on the answers provided during the hearing. She added, "I don't know that that is the answer based on where we are now. As it stands we don't even have the requisite support at our ports. You have those types of conversations when your situation is tight. We don't have the oversight right now."

Senator Kurt Vialet's sentiments were similar to Ms. Frett-Gregory's. "This proposal how it is written names particular states and removes the fingerprint section," he told this publication Friday

morning. Their rationale was that these states' licensure laws are pretty similar to ours. Some of those 21 states that they named allow a person once they hit 18 years old to apply for a gun license, and our law is 21."

He added, "My position is we don't want reciprocity with any gun laws at all. We don't want anybody to bring in guns into the territory; we already have [a gun] issue. So if somebody is going to become a legal gun owner in the Virgin Islands, let them go through the process of applying for a Virgin Islands gun license. We don't want to encourage individuals to bring guns into the Virgin Islands."

Another concern is the potential for the reciprocity measure to appear as if the territory is promoting itself a gun-friendly jurisdiction, Senator Samuel Carrion told the Consortium Friday morning.

For Ms. Frett-Gregory, the proposal was a nonstarter. "'Don't bring your guns here.' That's what we should be telling folks until we get a handle on the gun situation we have here in the Virgin Islands. Why are we opening the door?" she said during closing remarks at the Thursday hearing.