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Sarauw Says Backdoor Deals and Political Pressure Skewed Outcome of Vote for Horse Racing Bill That Gave Southland Gaming Decadeslong Exclusivity

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Senator Janelle Sarauw on Monday expressed disappointment in the manner in which the vote of Bill 34-0224 occurred at the legislative session Thursday. The measure saw an 8-7 vote in favor of the bill's passage, essentially providing Southland Gaming an exclusive contract to operate Video Lottery Terminals in the St. Thomas-St. John District until 2041, the senator said.

“Besides the provisions in the bill, it was truly a sad day in Virgin Islands history to witness the orchestrated compromise of the vote entrusted to our duly elected leaders by our constituents. The Legislature is a deliberative body, and each Senator has one vote to cast, but the deliberate tainting of that process sets a bad precedent and calls to question more than just voting aptitude, but voting integrity,” stated Ms. Sarauw.

Bill 34-0224 called for the 34th Legislature to ratify what the senator says is an unlawful 2003 contract "under the guise of restarting horse racing in the St. Thomas-St. John District," the senator said.

"The shifting of counsels, overwhelming lobbying and political pressure, and the strategic attempt to introduce "sham" appropriation amendments [which would have granted the Governor line-item veto privileges], had little to do with horse racing and the most to do with providing the exclusive contract to Southland Gaming to operate VLTs throughout the District, starving off any potential economic development opportunities in the gaming arena for the next 19 years," the release says.

It further states that Southland Gaming was not needed for the repairs of the Clinton Phipps Racetrack in St. Thomas. "In fact, in 2019 FEMA appropriated [\\$4.1 million](#) for the track, and that money could have been further supplemented using funds from the American Rescue Plan Act. Instead, Southland held horse racing and the track repair hostage via a 2018 lawsuit, in order to pursue their own special interest," the release says.

Ms. Sarauw said, "Frankly speaking, we didn't need this agreement with Southland to revive horse racing on St. Thomas. We had an existing agreement that provided St. Thomas with a promoter of live racing, and what would have been the first ever built-for-gaming facility in this district at the track. The federal government in 2019 through FEMA, awarded the Virgin Islands \$4.1M for the construction of a new replacement facility in Estate Bovoni. The only reason movement was stalled on getting horse racing restarted in this district was because of the 2018 Southland lawsuit filed against the GVI.

"As your Senator, in good conscience, I could not support rewarding Southland Gaming, the very same company responsible for undermining horse racing in this district, with an exclusive contract, knowing that we had the financial resources necessary to do so without giving them a new deal that extended until 2041. This is 2022. Who does that to their people? The integrity of my vote, entrusted to me by the people, will not be compromised."

The measure passed with eight senators voting in favor and seven against. Senator Javan James was the only St. Croix lawmaker who supported the measure.

- Marvin Blyden: Yes
- Samuel Carrion: No
- Dwayne DeGraff: Yes
- Novelle Francis: No
- Alma Francis-Heyliger: Yes
- Frett-Gregory: Yes
- Kenneth Gittens: No
- Javan James: Yes
- Franklin Johnson: No
- Carla Joseph: Yes
- Steven Payne, Sr.: Yes
- Milton Potter: Yes
- Janelle Sarauw: No
- Kurt Vialet: No
- Genevieve Whitaker: No

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