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More Horse Racing Disappointment: Key Stakeholders Fail to Attend Important Senate Hearing

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Horse in stable at the Randall 'Doc' James Racetrack. The racetrack was demolished as part of a 2016 contract between VIGL and the VI Government that promised a state-of-the-art facility. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

Visibly disappointed by the failure of key stakeholders in the horse racing industry to attend a hearing called by the Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks and Recreation, Senator Franklin Johnson recommended that those who failed to show up be subpoenaed.

“We need to take it more seriously and start subpoenaing them to these hearings. Let them start answering real questions,” Mr. Johnson told Committee Chairman Sen. Samuel Carrion on Tuesday. “We have been too kind with a lot of folks we are trying to get information from.”

Mr. Carrion said the word for the day was "frustration" when he realized that those with answers or clarity to certain questions did not show up to participate in the hearing — even though notice for the hearing was provided a month prior.

Among those who failed to attend was Robert E. Huckabee III, president and CEO of Southland Gaming of the Virgin Islands. Mr. Huckabee submitted correspondence stating that he would not be present.

Andrew Dubuque, CFO and managing partner at VIGL Operations LLC, and Hugo Hodge, chairman of the V.I. Horse Racing Commission were not in attendance. Calvert White, commissioner of the Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation was also not in attendance, though his testimony was read into the record.

Mr. Johnson said the passage of Bill No. 34-0224, which [extended an already decadeslong exclusivity agreement](#) for Southland Gaming, provided Huckabee and Southland Gaming with what they wanted and therefore they had no reason to attend the hearing. "I will never forget this bill as long as I am in this Legislature," Mr. Johnson said while reminding committee members that despite what was said, Bill No. 34-0224 was never about horse racing in the territory.

After listening to the testimony of Denis Lynch II, treasurer of the Flamboyant Park Horsemen Association, Mr. Johnson said he was very much convinced that there will be no horse racing in the territory in 2022.

In his testimony, Mr. Lynch said that the initial impetus was designed to project a platform where equine athletes, horsemen, investors, horse racing fans and proprietors could engage in economic advancement, sports, commerce, competition, and entertainment.

However, "Steps toward resolving thus far have been tenuous and littered with intentionally strategic delays, filled with maleficent negotiations wielded by the overarching power handlers. Delays and lack of urgency have been the consensus over the 6-year impasse of the redevelopment efforts of the Randall Doc James Racetrack," he said.

He explained that for an accurate pulse of this ongoing situation, revisiting the many failed encounters portrayed as progress would aid the committee's understanding of what has transpired, lending toward dismantling the fortitude of horse racing.

"There isn't going to be any horse racing in the Virgin Islands this year, let me make it clear there will be none," said Mr. Johnson as he made a plea to fix the racing surface on St. Croix because the horses need to exercise.

The senator also called for the involvement of horsemen in ongoing discussions with all parties. "I feel it is a little disrespectful by not including them. You don't have to break down penny for penny or dime for dime, just sit down with them and have these discussions," he recommended.

"It is frustrating for me who is not in the horse racing business at this time to hear the plight that these men are going through," added Mr. Johnson who continuously spoke about the passage of Bill No. 34-0224.

Aside from providing Southland Gaming with exclusivity in video lottery terminal gambling services until 2041, the bill provides for the ratification of the Second Amended Agreement to the Video Lottery Services Agreement and the Development Agreement regarding the Clinton E. Phipps Racetrack on St. Thomas.

"As a collective body, we understood the implication of such a bill being passed and realized that it hinged on the separability of the St. Croix track being recognized. To date, there has been no added traction or recourse that would lessen the financial constraint imposed against the participants of this great sport," Mr. Lynch said while asking legislators what can be done to replenish financial and endless economic woes.

Jason Williams, who represented the racing operations of VIGL told the committee that he was unable to speak about certain matters.

Senator Kurt Vialet described the ongoing saga as "games" and questioned the decision by Southland Gaming and others who did not show up to the hearing. "I am calling on Government House to immediately execute the agreement that will allow St. Croix to move forward and allow St. Thomas to be able to move forward," Mr. Vialet said. "They are having the discussion, there has been a proposal, the governor said his legal counsel will work on it ...act on the document."

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