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Resumption of Horse Racing Stagnant; Carrion Says Process Is Full of Excuses

Sports / **Published On June 28, 2022 06:34 AM /**

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Randall "Doc" James Racetrack on St. Croix in May 2016 before it was demolished. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

Those responsible for the restart of horse racing in the territory appeared no closer to resolving the restart of the sport as it was when the Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks and Recreation held its latest hearing in May.

On Monday, members of the committee held yet another hearing to determine the status of horse racing after five years of inactivity.

However, after four hours of hearing testimonies and receiving questions from senators, Senator Samuel Carrion, who chairs the committee, concluded that the race tracks on St. Croix and St.

Thomas — pegged to restart the once thriving industry — had been stalled by persistent “excuses.”

"We continue to have a level of frustration and also a level of disappointment and at the end the horsemen are the ones who are suffering," he said. "We urge the administration to move quickly because I think the horsemen have waited long enough."

The access agreement for Southland Gaming to begin construction on the Clinton Phipps Race Track in St. Thomas, and the modified draft for VIGL to reconstruct the Randall “Doc” James facility on St. Croix have still not been provided.

Mr. Carrion stressed that timelines, and information of budgets, and established meeting are needed for the process to move forward.

There was a yearslong [legal dispute](#) between Southland Gaming Inc. and VIGL Operations, with Southland Gaming seeking to preserve exclusive rights to video lottery terminals on St. Thomas and St. John, while VIGL had [entered into a deal with the government](#) to operate both race tracks and the gambling at the tracks.

Even with the court proceedings now settled, Jason Williams, the general manager of VIGL Horse Racing Operations could not give an end date to the company’s negotiations with the government to develop the St. Croix track.

He insisted that VIGL would not move forward with even leveling the race track, which would allow horsemen to practice, without a signed agreement with the government. Mr. Williams further stated that the company has been waiting on a response for a revised draft document which VIGL sent to the government last month.

“We have not gotten an official word yet in terms of them sending back anything to us saying yes or no,” he said. “We have not gotten anything in writing from them”.

Meanwhile, Shaine Gaspard, chief operating officer of Southland Gaming — the developer of the St. Thomas race track — said they are ready to move forward and shared that the timeline for the access agreement is “very, very close,” but could not happen without permits.

“On June 22-24, 2022 members of our development team met onsite with Richard Barrios, Architect & Structure Engineer, Shane Ramsey, Draftsman and Ernie Cruse, MEP Engineer to complete a detailed assessment of the existing structures that are being renovated and retrofitted,” Mr. Gaspard said.

He said the completion of a full site assessment of the existing utilities, infrastructure and overall site layout to ensure the overall aesthetics and functionality of the finished project "met the expectations of SGVI and the government."

With a little less enthusiasm, Elroy A. Bates, Jr., president of the Flamboyant Park Horsemen said horse owners are fed up with the slow and stagnant progress that horse racing has taken.

“August 6, 2017, was the last race day on the island of St. Croix,” he reminded. "That is way too long. We, the horsemen, have been taking all the blows for the past five years now. The horsemen have been breeding and maintaining their horses, hoping to see them race, with just disappointment after disappointment. Although prices at the feed shops have nearly doubled, we continue to feed and care for our horses. Today marks the third time we are in front of the Senate

in four months.”

Sheldon Turnbull of the Virgin Island Horse Racing Commission, speaking on behalf of Chairman Hugo Vincent Hodge Jr., in his scripted remarks reiterated how little had been accomplished to make the track usable.

He said owners were advised of VIGL’s need for them to vacate the premises to allow for construction activities to commence. Unfortunately, he said, very little to nothing has taken place as they approach the one-year mark of the evacuation of the horses from the track.

The hearing took place at the Frits E. Lawaetz Conference Room in St. Croix on Monday.

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