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Violet Assailed at Boisterous Town Hall to Address Zoning Changes For Rum Distillery Made Without Community Notice

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Senator Kurt Violet at a town hall meeting at the Rotary West Community Center in Frederiksted near the under-construction Paul E. Joseph Stadium. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Senator Kurt Violet should be gearing up for a general election battle with Governor Albert Bryan, who just won the democratic primary on Saturday. Instead, Mr. Violet is locked in an issue that is threatening his campaign, and at a boisterous town hall in Frederiksted on Monday night called by the senator to address the matter, community outrage, it appears, only intensified.

At the core of the issue is [Raising Cane](#), a sugarcane-producing company spanning over 200 acres on Estate Prosperity on the west end of St. Croix. The company intends to form local partnerships to grow 9,850 more acres of sugarcane, a feat that would see Raising Cane supplying Cruzan Rum and Diageo with almost half of the molasses they need to run their operations, according to Raising Cane, which says it plans to partner with the companies to provide them with molasses.

The idea was conceived when company owner Robert Apfel, a New Yorker and well-known Wall Street entrepreneur toured the Cruzan Rum Distillery in 2014 and learned that all the molasses had to be imported. Mr. Apfel thought that having the molasses produced locally from an island with a long and rich history of sugarcane production would be ideal.

As of Nov. 2021, Estate Prosperity had over 100 acres of land in use for the cultivation of sugarcane, according to information found on Raising Cane's website.

Plans, it appears, were on track. However, things changed quickly when it was discovered that Raising Cane had intentions of building a rum distillery, and worked with Mr. Vialet to amend a zoning law that cleared the way for Mr. Apfel's company to move forward with its distillery plans without the required processes of rezoning.

At the meeting were residents from east and west of the island, most of whom voiced their frustration — whether in mumblings, loudly, or when given the mic to voice their concerns.

Among them was Alicia Barnes, a former senator and former Dept. of Planning and Natural Resources commissioner, who called for the law ([Act 8569](#)) to be repealed and for DPNR to revoke the permit.

"DPNR allows for a process of rezoning and variances," Ms. Barnes began. "If you want to go through the process correctly, you file a zoning application with the Dept. of Planning and Natural Resources, and you go through the process. It goes through a technical analysis of the methodology, it speaks to environmental impact, it has public hearings to allow for you to come and comment. And the reason we're so frustrated here is because what was done by the Legislature circumvented the process that is codified in Title 29 [of V.I. Code]."

Ms. Barnes asked Mr. Apfel why didn't he approach D.P.N.R. for a use variance or a rezoning permit. "Why did you put the good senator in this predicament by doing this particular change to the code?" she asked, at which point Mr. Vialet's wife, Wanda Figueroa-Vialet left the town hall meeting, which took place at the Rotary West Community Center in Frederiksted near the under-construction Paul E. Joseph Stadium.

"Nobody put me in a predicament," Mr. Vialet quickly responded, drawing loud rebukes from town hall participants.

He then tried to explain why he moved forward with the measure that is now law. "There was a desire to not rezone agricultural land to any other purpose. I didn't want to rezone agricultural land to commercial, industrial or anything else. I wanted it to remain agricultural land. I was not going to support Mr. Apfel coming with a rezoning for 10-15 acres for commercial or industrial. Once it remains agricultural, it remains agricultural forever," he said.

Mr. Apfel said he sought to build a 2 feet wide, 8 feet long facility to squeeze sugarcane into juice. He further explained that when he approached D.P.N.R., "they said that we would have to rezone the entire parcel of land from agricultural to commercial. We would have to apply for the rezoning of all 80 acres, and it would break my heart to take agricultural land and turn it to industrial."

Not wanting to do so, Mr. Apfel sought the help of Mr. Vialet, who moved to change the law that allowed the distillery plans to move forward — though there was no community notice, no comment and no hearings on the land use change.

"There's a use variance category as well," Ms. Barnes responded to Mr. Apfel's explanation.

"My recommendation: repeal the law, D.P.N.R. revoke the permit, and let [Mr. Apfel] come to D.P.N.R. for a use variance application that can go through the technical review and the public hearings," Mr. Barnes said to loud cheers and applause from town hall participants.

The matter has galvanized community members in close proximity to the facility, and a petition calling for Act 8569 to be repealed has [drawn over 500 signatures](#).

The situation has also weakened Mr. Vialet's standing in Frederiksted on St. Croix, an island Mr. Vialet needs to heavily carry during the general election if he is to have a chance of winning in November.

Senator Novelle Francis Jr., who also signed up as a sponsor of the bill, was present. Other senators included Kenny Gittens and Genevieve Whitaker, though they were not sponsors of the measure.

During the town hall, Mr. Vialet said that after meeting with community members who were concerned about the amendment, he admitted that "it definitely did open the door for large-scale distillery development on farmland. So I acknowledged at that meeting that you are right. And based on the fact that you are right, we're going to go back and offer an amendment that would make sure that there are no large-scale distillery development on any farmland."

The senator said he has submitted legislation that seeks to define exactly what can be built on the Estate Prosperity property. "It cannot be more than 170,000 proof gallons because we don't want that. We don't want this large-scale development on any farmland on St. Croix," he said. Mr. Vialet also called on Mr. Apfel to stop the development until the amendment is offered and approved.

Following the town hall, Mr. Vialet commented Facebook Monday night, [saying](#), "It's been a long day but the fight for Economic Development is always a challenge on St. Croix. I am not defeated or discouraged I am actually charged with a determination to create jobs for our people. Often, the majority of economic development ideas are swept away and we wonder why our island remains stagnant. At times I question what we really want. Hopefully, some day we would figure it out."

Last updated at 11:09 a.m. on Friday, Aug. 12, 2022.