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Bryan Encourages Residents to Put Pressure on Sarauw to Bring Recreational Marijuana Bill to Senate Floor

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Governor Albert Bryan, left, listens to Telluride head of operations Rick Scicchitano during a tour of the marijuana grow facility on Wed., Oct. 27, 2021. By. VI CONSORTIUM

Governor Albert Albert Bryan took the opportunity at the USVI Community Business Forum on Thursday, to chastise senator Janelle Sarauw for not bringing the Virgin Islands Cannabis Use Act before the Legislature as promised.

“Janelle Sarauw has been sitting on the cannabis legislation for two years, saying she has a piece of legislation. We’ve waited, she hasn’t produced any legislation,” he said.

Unlike medical marijuana, which had been made legal in the U.S. Virgin Islands since January 2019, recreational use of marijuana has not yet made it past the senators, who called an initial bill proposal by Mr. Bryan “rushed” and voted against it.

It has been two years since the governor submitted a reworked version of the bill to the Legislature, and he said that Ms. Sarauw, who prevented the motion from being voted on, has still not presented the bill which would legalize the recreational use of the plant.

In October 2021, when senators toured a Marijuana Grow Facility in Colorado, Ms. Sarauw told the Consortium that the bill would come before the end of the year. "The bill will come before the end of the year," she said, referring to the year 2021. "But it was important for everybody to be on the same page and not continually spew a false narrative that it's an easy industry. It's very scientific... By the end of the year I promise you you'll have a bill on the floor."

Since that time, however, the measure has not been brought to the Senate floor.

The revised adult use bill would allow locals to participate in the billion-dollar cannabis industry and Mr. Bryan said it would provide “restitution” for people who have been incarcerated for marijuana use. He suggested that opportunities would be lost to foreign investors without adequate legislation to include locals in the industry.

“We need you to put pressure on the Legislature to pass the Adult Use Cannabis Act. If we pass medicinal, the medicinal doesn’t have the protections the Adult Use has for local people to be the growers. If we get the medicinal up, we’re going to lose the whole industry to people from other places,” Mr. Bryan insisted.

Referring to the industry as “a cash cow”, Mr. Bryan continued to push the narrative that taxes derived from the new sector would positively change the territory’s economic outlook, particularly, he hopes it would help further stabilize the finances of the Government Employee Retirement System (GERS).

“When the critics come, tell them we already have a cannabis industry, it’s just not regulated. It’s safer if we controlled it, regulate it, and my favorite word – tax it,” he emphasized.

Tax on cannabis is anticipated to be no less than 7.5% for residents, 25% for non-residents, and 0% for medical card holders.

In making his case, the governor stated, “You can’t own a dispensary unless you’ve been a resident of the Virgin Islands for 10 of the last 15 years. The dispensaries can only sell 30 percent of what they grow so, they have to buy from farmers. Farmers have a chance to participate.”

“This is the only industry where they cannot import us to death. If you make a gummy, it’s going to have to be made in St. Croix; if you sell flour, it has to be made in St. Croix; oil, it has to be made in St Croix – everything has to be made in St. Croix. And guess what, it has to be made in St. Thomas again and it has to be made in St. John again. This is the biggest opportunity for us and we’re sleeping,” he continued.

Mr. Bryan invited those in attendance and those listening via Facebook to the business forum to “put pressure on the Legislature” to make the bill law, saying, “You guys are not going to the Legislature and putting pressure on these guys to stop holding up our legislation.”

“It’s election year, tell them, you want my vote, pass cannabis,” he told the dispersing crowd.

