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Gittens Offers Some Critique for Governor Bryan's 'Optimistic' State of the Territory Address

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Senator Kenneth Gittens. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Democratic senator and Majority Caucus leader Kenneth Gittens has offered a response to Governor Albert Bryan's fifth State of the Territory address, delivered before the Legislature on Monday.

Mr. Gittens described Governor Bryan's remarks as "well-delivered and optimistic," but offered critiques on a number of the governor's talking points.

"There have been some very positive developments in recent months such as the return of cruise ships on St. Croix, work moving ahead on Paul E. Joseph Stadium, opening the Drag Racetrack,

the expanded Territorial Park System and the possibilities before us in terms of modernizing Government services,” Mr. Gittens reported through a press release on Tuesday.

“Cruise ship visits have, as the Governor noted, tripled to St. Croix, but they are docking in Frederiksted, which still needs a great deal of attention,” he added.

The senator went on to express some concerns which he believes have been overlooked.

One of his growing fears is the cost of living in the Virgin Islands, especially with rising energy costs.

Governor Bryan gave a commitment, during his presentation, to solving the energy crisis in the USVI, including upgrades to the infrastructure of the Water and Power Authority, and addressing the many issues facing the beleaguered company.

“I am confident in setting this goal because I know there are tremendous resources being made available to help WAPA turn the corner on its problems and this administration has the courage and determination to see it through,” Mr. Bryan said.

The commitment represents Governor Bryan’s continuing efforts to modernize the territory’s power system. Last March, the governor announced plans to make St. Croix [100 percent solar powered](#), citing the rising cost of fuel as a threat to the economy.

Senator Gittens said he was “very excited about the pending St. Croix solar conversion,” but said WAPA’s management and governance needed to be reviewed. “I would like more details on how we are going to address mismanagement at WAPA and when consumers can look forward to these promised reduced rates,” Mr. Gittens remarked.

“Governor Bryan also said a year ago, in his last State of the Territory Address, that the Government was working to renegotiate WAPA’s debt to VITOL so I had hoped we would hear the result of those efforts by now,” he pressed on. The issue of WAPA’s outstanding debt grew so contentious that in late November 2022, VITOL suspended deliveries of propane to WAPA, leaving the authority unable to run its newer, more efficient generators for weeks.

Mr. Gittens pinpointed some other significant concerns, which he believed were overlooked, including the confirmation of a date for the opening of Juan F. Louis (JFL) North facility.

During his address, the governor pledged to improve healthcare in the territory, notably the opening of the JFL North modular facility on St. Croix, the temporary hospital that was supposed to be in operation years ago.

In December 2022, Mr. Bryan had said the facility would [open during the first quarter of 2023](#), and reaffirmed this timeline during Monday’s address.

However, Senator Gittens said he had been hoping to hear a specific date for the commissioning of the long-awaited facility. “I really hoped the Governor would take the opportunity tonight to announce the date that JFL North modular hospital would open,” he claimed. “We must remember that this is only intended as a temporary hospital as a result of hurricane damage going on six years ago. Patients and staff are dealing with very challenging conditions at JFL.”

During his speech, the governor also specified that \$23.5 million was disbursed to frontline workers via the Premium Pay program. Senator Gittens was satisfied with this move as he had

been an advocate for supplemental pay for frontline workers in the territory since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

“I am pleased that the program was finally put in place,” Mr. Gittens said. “However, there remain a number of Virgin Islanders who have not received the Premium Pay to which they are entitled. I will be reaching out to the Administration to see how we can address this.”

The senator said that one glaring omission from the governor’s State of the Territory address was a status update on St. Croix’s shuttered refinery, owned by Port Hamilton Refining and Transportation.

“Given the huge potential for impact on our economy and environment, I did expect an update as to the status of the refinery,” he said. Pollution concerns put a stop to refinery operations in May 2021, just weeks after an at-the-time triumphant reopening by former owners Limetree Bay, a move that led Limetree to declare bankruptcy and sell the refinery after pouring approximately \$4 billion into its startup attempt.

Last month, following [a scathing report](#) from Environmental Protection Agency inspectors who found key pieces of storage and refinery equipment riddled with corrosion, the governor reported making great strides toward achieving “the necessary balance between protecting the health of St. Croix residents working in and living near the refinery and the territory’s economic development through finding a path to the progressive reopening of the refinery.”

"And we remain focused on working with the EPA and Port Hamilton to achieve that balance safely," Mr. Bryan had said.

Mr. Gittens, chair of the 35th Legislature’s Committee on Homeland Security, Justice & Public Safety, expressed contentment with falling crime rates in the territory but called for more efforts on eradicating crime, and for proper equipment for law enforcement.

“I look forward to getting details from the V.I. Police Department and other agencies at our first hearing this term on February 7,” he went on to say.

Mr. Gittens said more work needs to be done in making the USVI an attractive place to live and work, to ensure that top local talent remains in the territory.

“I agree that the overall outlook for the Territory is promising,” the Senator said. “But we need to do more to prepare for what is likely a global recession and we must look at strategies for addressing inflation and raising wages or we will continue to lose the Virgin Islands’ best and brightest to opportunities elsewhere,” said Mr. Gittens who was the top vote-getter in the St. Croix District's Senate race during the last general election.