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VIGL Unveils Controversial Downsizing Plan for 'Doc' James Racetrack in St. Croix

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ST. CROIX — Virgin Islands Gaming LLC (VIGL) has unveiled plans to significantly downsize the grandstand, stable areas, and pocket section of the Randall "Doc" James Racetrack on St. Croix. The proposal, currently under review by the Department of Planning and Natural Resources Coastal Zone Management Committee (CZM), was discussed during a meeting on Thursday.

Benjamin Keurlats, an environmental engineer from Tysam Tech, emphasized the strategic nature of these modifications. He said they aim to preserve the racetrack's history while introducing modern upgrades and expanded entertainment services to enhance the racetrack's reputation in the Virgin Islands.

“The grandstand seating is being reduced from 3,600 to 1,200 seating spaces,” Mr. Keurlats explained, noting that new areas, including a party pavilion, would increase standing room for visitors. “So we... expect that the cohesive design will allow for more patrons or at least equivalent to, so while the footprint is reduced, the services are either increased or mitigated.”

The downsizing proposal has been met with concern over the potential for developers to withdraw from the project if forced to invest more capital than initially planned.

The proposed design consolidates buildings, introduces a trackside promenade, a casino, improved parking, and increases green space. Keurlats also highlighted plans for a monitoring camera system for the coastal area and annual field reviews.

However, Committee Member Kai Nielsen voiced concerns over the proposed development's potential environmental impact, particularly in relation to shoreline erosion. He suggested that the planned placement of a restaurant, roughly 250 feet from the shoreline, could be problematic given the significant coastal erosion seen in the past 25 to 30 years. Gathering firm data on the matter was deemed crucial.

Discontent was also expressed regarding the proximity of the quarantine barn to regular barns. Despite assurances from Clarence Brown of Design District Architects that the proposed placement met all necessary regulations, critics argued it could pose a risk to healthy horses.

Kurt Vialet, former senator, who has sponsored legislation in support of VIGL, countered these concerns, stating that finding alternative developers for the racetrack would be difficult in the current economic climate. He argued that a reduced footprint for the racing facility would be preferable to no operational facility at all.

Brown expressed gratitude for the feedback and promised to relay the concerns to the developers. “Our plan is to get this right. We’ll do our best but within the realm of reality,” he stated.

Jay Watson, a key stakeholder, highlighted the need for closer attention to the business aspect of horseracing, particularly betting, urging the introduction of machine and window wagering at the track.

The CZM is set to reconvene to make a final decision on VIGL’s application.