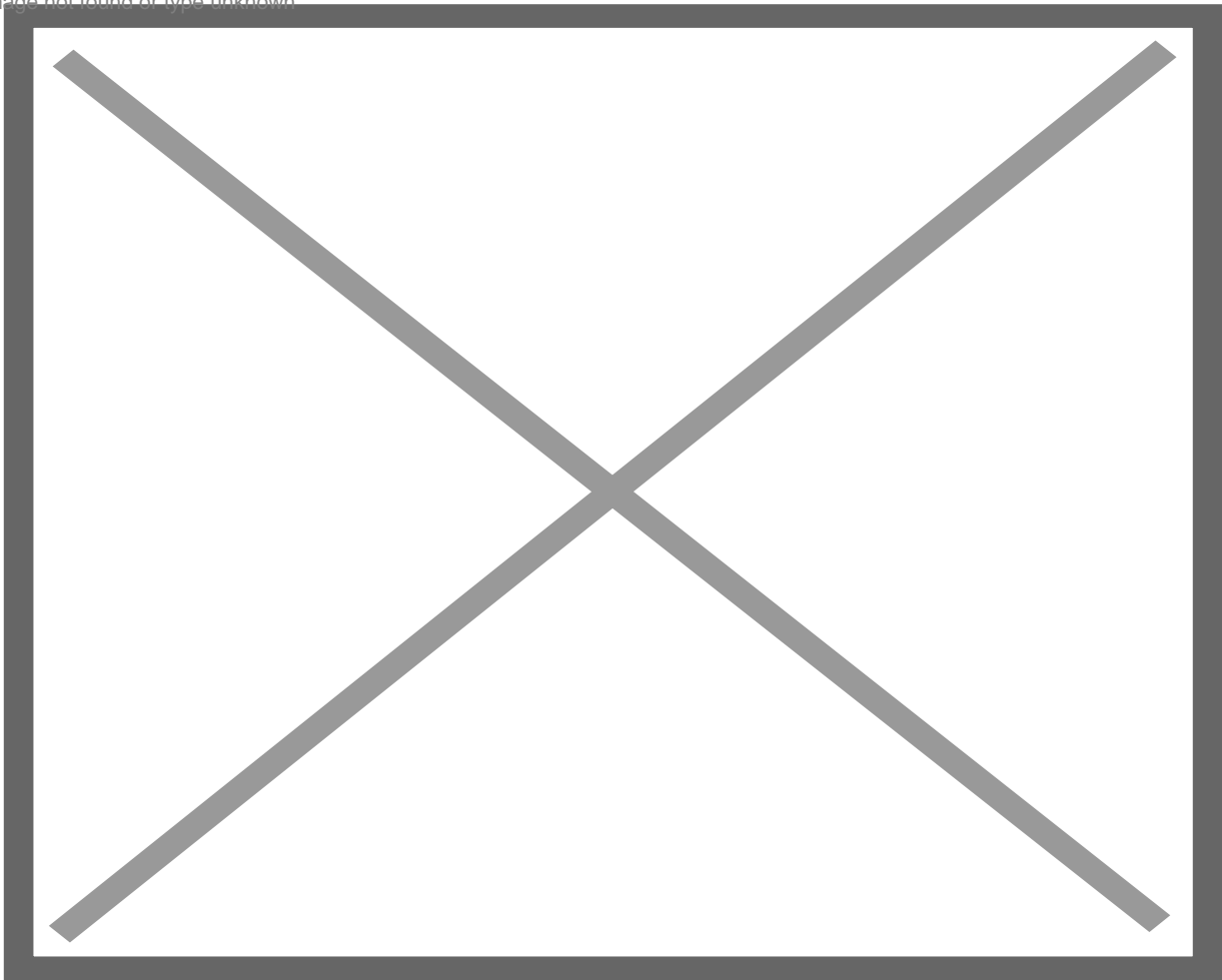


## Measure to Provide Local Athletes With Financial Reward for Victory Abroad May be on Horizon Following Senate Discussion

Sports / **Published On July 22, 2023 06:36 AM /**

Staff Consortium **July 22, 2023**

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The V.I. Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation (DPSR) and the Virgin Islands Olympic Committee (VIOC) appeared jointly before the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance on Tuesday, seeking to secure more funding to advance sporting development in the region. The meeting encompassed a wide range of topics, including the proposed budget for DPSR, a salary hike for department employees, a potential rewards program for winning athletes, and the progress of sports facility development in the Virgin Islands.

DPSR Commissioner Calvert White presented and defended his department's budget request of just over \$10 million for fiscal year 2024. Just over half of those funds – 52 percent – will be expended on wages for the department's 130 positions, with a further 31 percent earmarked for

fringe benefits. The remainder of the budget, according to Mr. White, will go towards supplies, utilities and other services. Cost-saving upgrades are being implemented at various facilities to reduce utility bills, lawmakers learned, including the installation of energy-efficient LED lights which can be controlled via smartphone.

The \$10 million budget, White explained, will be divided among DPSR's three divisions: Facilities, Parks and Open Spaces will receive \$4.16 million, Sports and Recreation is allocated \$3.6 million, and the Office of the Commissioner has a \$2.35 million allocation for the upcoming fiscal year.

Along with funding appropriated by the Legislature, DPSR manages a miscellaneous grant appropriation of \$1,613,500, offering financial assistance to 44 nonprofit organizations. Other non-appropriated revenues include monies from casinos, the Territorial Park Fund, the Athletic Fund, and the Tourism Revolving Fund, which have collected considerable amounts in the previous fiscal year and have projected increases for FY 2024.

Mr. White also noted the four discretionary grant awards managed by DPSR totaling over \$6,975,000. This includes an appropriation of \$675,000 to the Caribbean Drag Racing Association for the renovation of the St. Croix Motorsports Complex. This grant, White says, allowed the resumption of the junior drag racing program which currently has 35 children registered. An additional 35 have been placed on a waiting list due to equipment shortages. Over \$2.6 million was awarded to the USVI Soccer association for upgrades at the professional soccer field, and two cricketing associations received funding to develop the sport, including the creation of a youth cricket development program.

Like other department heads before him, Mr. White complained that low salaries within DPSR have cost him valuable employees, who have left for better-paying jobs elsewhere. He shared the DPSR's plans to grow from the current 130 employees to the over 200 that are needed, acknowledging that this effort would take some time to bear fruit. During the question and answer session that followed the testifiers' initial submissions, Senator Ray Fonseca queried whether DPSR would support a salary hike to a minimum hourly wage of \$15, up from the just over \$13 employees at the bottom of the pay scale currently receive. White welcomed the proposal and promised to pursue the matter with the two unions that represent workers in the department.

Following the DPSR commissioner's testimony, VI Olympic Committee (VIOC) President Angel Morales provided his testimony to the budget committee, noting that the organization supports 24 member federations and their elite athletes, as well as the VIOC secretariat. With the monies available to it, Mr. Morales says the Committee is able to support approximately three-quarters of its member federations' requests for funding.

While it receives 70 percent of its operating funds from the International Olympic Committee and other international sporting bodies, for the upcoming fiscal year, VIOC has requested an appropriation of \$400,000 from the government of the Virgin Islands to support its operations.

The VIOC president said that the organization plans to focus on establishing a permanent office and multi-purpose sports facility on St. Thomas. "It is time to complete our sports facilities and upgrade the existing facilities. These facilities will increase visitors to our islands and help in the economic development of our Virgin Islands," Mr. Morales argued. In fiscal year 2022, a sum of \$2 million was appropriated for that purpose, and the money will remain available for use until expended. The total cost for the project, lawmakers learned, had not yet been determined, depending on several factors that had not yet been finalized.

A lengthy discussion ensued regarding horse racing in the territory, which culminated in Mr. White expressing satisfaction over the progress being made with the Clinton E. Phipps facility. However, he declined to support Governor Bryan's recent assertion that the track would be ready to begin races next April, noting that he was not present in the discussion at which Governor Bryan made that statement.

With regards to Mr. Fonseca's question about re-establishing a drag racing track on St. Thomas, White noted that finding suitable land area was an issue. An old track near Bovoni garnered noise complaints from residents, and efforts to turn the track to redirect the noise out to sea did not pan out, he said.

Apart from new facilities to develop sports in the territory, senators were concerned about what is done for athletes who bring gold medals back to the USVI from high-level sporting events. After learning that other countries shower their gold medalists with land, vehicles, and other high-value rewards and incentives for winning gold in regional and international sporting competitions, Senator Donna Frett-Gregory proposed the establishment of a similar reward program for Virgin Islanders who win glory for the territory via sports. "We can't ignore stuff like that," she argued, vowing to press for discussions on a monetary award for winning athletes. A sum of \$100,000 was mentioned as being feasible for this kind of award, and VIOC President Morales thanked lawmakers for sparking the discussion.

Ultimately, both DSPR Commissioner White and VIOC President Morales expressed gratitude to the Legislature for always being cooperative and supportive of sporting development in the territory. However, they pressed for an even greater level of spending on facility development and upgrades, particularly as winning performances by Virgin Islands athletes have been putting the territory on the map regarding sports and the possibility of touristic benefits. "If we want the U.S. Virgin Islands to be a sports tourism destination, we have to spend the money and upgrade our facilities," said Mr. White. Mr. Morales concurred: "It all goes back to facilities that meet the standards of the International Federations. This way we can bring in events."