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Senate approves numerous major bills

By SUZANNE CARLSON Daily News Staff
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Senators approved numerous, substantial measures in Thursday's Legislative session, including the long-awaited merger of the V.I. Fire Service and Emergency Medical Services. But Gov. Albert Bryan Jr.'s bill to enable horse racing to resume in the territory was held for further review, after senators expressed serious concerns about it in Tuesday's Committee of the Whole.

Bill No. 34-0224 would amend the law to allow for Video Lottery Terminals at the Clinton Phipps racetrack on St. Thomas. Bryan has said it would facilitate a settlement agreement in a lawsuit filed by VLT operator Southland Gaming, which claimed the government violated its exclusive contract by entering a new contract with VIGL LLC in 2016 to operate slot machines at the St. Thomas track.

Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory had said the bill would be brought to a vote Thursday, but at the start of session she said the measure was withdrawn for further review.



In response to questions from The Daily News, Government House spokesman Richard Motta Jr. said Thursday that “it is our understanding that the Legislature intends to further consider the bill in short order.”

There has not been a horse race at either the St. Thomas or St. Croix track in five years, amid the stalemate over gambling contracts, and track development and operating deals between the government and the two companies.

Motta declined to comment on what the delay might mean for the lawsuit. V.I. Attorney General Denise George has said the litigation would continue until a settlement can be reached. If negotiations ultimately fail, a federal judge could be forced to make a ruling as to whether the government violated its contract with Southland.

All 15 senators were present at the beginning of Thursday’s session, but Sen. Samuel Carrion was excused to attend to a family emergency.

Senators voted to attach non-germane amendments to Bill No. 34-0087, hanging appropriations off what is commonly referred to as a “Christmas tree” bill. The original bill creates a Complete Streets Policy and Task Force within the Department of Public Works “to aid in the development and implementation of strategies to increase the usability of all streets for all modes of travel for citizens of all ages and abilities in the Virgin Islands; making a \$100,000 appropriation from the Community Facilities Trust Account to the Department of Public works to implement the Complete Streets Policy and for other related purposes.”

One non-germane amendment appropriates \$150,000 from the general fund to Island Green Living Association for an ocean-bound plastics program, and another appropriated \$3.5 million to the V.I. Port Authority from federal American Rescue Plan funds received by the local government, or any other available funding for expansion of the Rohlsen Airport departure lounge on St. Thomas, including for three “boarding bridges” and additional restrooms to be constructed in future phases of renovation. Those amounts are to remain available until expended.

Senators voted to approve Bill No. 34-0170, relating to Economic Development Commission program, to “amend the incentives to beneficiaries to further their commitments to investment in the Virgin Islands community.” Frett-Gregory said the bill ensures the EDC isn’t making “arbitrary” decisions and establishes a clearer framework for approving or denying applications for tax incentives from the V.I. government.

Senators approved Bill No. 34-0171, which allows retirees to reenter government service and retain their annuity while paying a contribution to the retirement system. Senators said the bill will help GERS collect contributions while experienced employees are allowed to keep working beyond the mandatory retirement age, at a time when many critical positions are going unfilled.

One of the most controversial bills Thursday was relatively benign.

Bill No. 34-0182 allows for exemptions to the law requiring Senate approval for naming of public property, so the University of the Virgin Islands and Luis and Schneider hospitals can strike deals with donors to name buildings after them in exchange for contributions.

Sen. Kurt Violet said it’s common practice and takes nothing from the Senate’s broader property-naming powers, but Sens. Dwayne DeGraff, Alma Francis Heyliger and Franklin Johnson voted against the bill. Whitaker did not vote.

Other bills approved Thursday were:

- Bill No. 34-0191, to clarify the purpose of the chapter on captive insurance companies, and to prohibit the organization, within the Virgin Islands, of a special category of multi-state insurers that may not be required to comply with the accreditation standards