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20 Races, Up to \$1.6 Million in Annual Purses: Bates and Bryan Push Southland Deal to Revive St. Croix Horse Racing

Bryan said track work is already moving, with design nearly done, sand purchased and a resurfacing RFP due soon, while the Southland deal promises no new public money, at least 20 races, purses up to \$1.6M and gaming-tax revenue for horsemen.

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James Bates said the new purse structure and gaming revenue share could finally give St. Croix horsemen a workable path to revive racing at the Randall “Doc” James racetrack. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM.

During a Friday interview hosted by Consortium publisher Ernice Gilbert, St. Croix horseracing representative James Bates called on executive and legislative branch officials to collaborate on finalizing a deal with Southland Gaming that would bring horse racing back to St. Croix.

In late April, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. [announced](#) that draft legislation would be sent to the Senate for the ratification of a deal where Southland Gaming would take up the responsibility for redeveloping the Randall “Doc” James racetrack. The company would also serve as promoter for race days for an initial five-year period offering a minimum of \$800,000 in guaranteed purses each year. In return, the company will be allowed to operate gaming services at the St. Croix racetrack as well as the recently redeveloped Clinton Phipps track on St. Thomas. They will also be allowed to establish two new gaming centers on St. Thomas, and will enjoy extended exclusivity over gaming on St. Thomas and St. John through 2049.

Governor Bryan was quizzed on whether the public should view the deal as the re-establishment of horse racing on St. Croix, or a broader gaming expansion thrust by Southland Gaming. He responded by characterizing the agreement as two deals wrapped into one package. Regulatory tweaks such as a 34% cap on the share of gaming revenues owed to the government are intended to incentivize the expansion of Southland’s gaming footprint in the territory, “to be able to finance the St. Croix track.” Governor Bryan pushed back against fears that this would threaten the gaming industry on St. Croix, however. “They’re putting one racino VLT machine shop at the race track in St. Croix, but two new casinos in St. Thomas. It’s clear their goal is to solidify their footprint in St. Thomas,” he pointed out.

Public concerns that Southland Gaming was being protected with exclusivity rights on St. Thomas while gaming operators on St. Croix will not enjoy similar advantages were rebutted by Governor Bryan, who suggested that the deal being offered to Southland Gaming is not meaningfully different from the arrangement that VIGL was offered.

He went further, musing that casino gaming on St. Croix has failed. “I say it’s failed because it has been unable to attract new hotel development to the island of St. Croix,” even with reduced requirements for the size of qualifying operations. Now, the governor urged, Crucians should turn their attention elsewhere. “Let’s use some of the same gaming revenue that’s moving around St. Croix and get a horse track built, get some of it dedicated in terms of the purses that have to be paid, and at the same time, bring back the doping regulations and everything else that we want to do so we have safe horse racing.”

The governor also reiterated his assurance that no additional public money would be needed to finance the reconstruction of the track under the deal. The government was still using allocated funds, he disclosed, to advance work on the racetrack. “We’ve almost finished design. We’ve already bought the sand for the track. We’ve got an RFP going out within the next week or two for the resurfacing of the track.” Work would not stop just because there is a potential deal on the table, Governor Bryan insisted. “We want horse racing before we leave office, so we’re going to move in a direction that allows us to complete the track itself...and have at least one race day before we leave. That was our goal,” he declared. The track, he noted, already costs taxpayer money to maintain, with no current return on that investment due to the lack of activity.

If the deal is approved by the Legislature as currently written, the agreement stipulates at least 20 races each year between St. Thomas and St. Croix. With both tracks supporting a healthy race industry within the territory, he envisions greater participation from the neighboring British Virgin Islands. “Hopefully we will have Greater Virgin Islands horse racing and that’s something I’m really looking forward to.”

After a question about seeming disparities between Southland's projected potential revenues from the St. Croix racetrack project and the purses being offered for race days, Governor Bryan's Chief of Staff Kevin Williams pointed out that the \$800,000 purse stipulation contained in the agreement was the floor, not the ceiling. "The horsemen have to execute a separate live racing agreement between the horsemen and the promoter...they can actually be running for more than a million dollars." According to Mr. Williams, total purse amounts could reach as high as \$1.6 million. Additionally, the agreement in its current form provides for 10% of the tax revenues collected from gaming operations to go towards the horsemen as a collective.

"That's a good purse," Mr. Bates opined, noting that the last agreement negotiated by St. Croix horsemen was on much less favorable terms. Now, in addition to the guaranteed purses, "we gain a percent from every dollar that the machines make," Mr. Bates noted. "We know that they're going to build a hell of a gaming [facility] down by our race track, and that will attract a lot of people. So we're gonna benefit."

What St. Croix needs right now, Mr. Bates says, is for "the senators and the government to just come together and make a good deal." It is now the Legislature's responsibility "to go through it and fix whatever they need to fix," he says, as the public relies on them to ensure their interest is protected. At the end of the day, however, "we want them to come to the table, fix everything, and let we see if this could go through."

"I don't want them to walk away from the deal," Governor Bryan said regarding Southland Gaming. "We finally have a promoter that we could bank on, that we could set our clock on, put our money on, that's going to make it happen," he said. Mr. Williams pointed out that "for over 10 years, we have not had any economic impact from horse racing" on St. Croix. This opportunity to change that situation should not be lost, the three men argued.

If the Legislature ultimately tanks the deal, bringing horseracing back to St. Croix will be the responsibility of the next administration. "We will finish this office and we'd have one horse race and then we'll leave it there," Governor Bryan said. He hopes, however, that a workable path forward will ultimately be found. "This is something I know we could get across the finish line," he concluded.