



REGARDING LBJ GARDENS

Testimony

Community Health, Safety, Relocation, and Fair Compensation

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Testimony Before the 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands

Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance

Honorable Novelle E. Francis, Jr., Chair

Regarding Conditions and Government Response in LBJ Gardens

Good morning, Senator Novelle E. Francis, Jr., Chair of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance, Vice Chair, Senator Marvin A. Blyden, and Members of the Committee, and all present.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the ongoing conditions facing the residents of LBJ Gardens community in Christiansted, St. Croix.

My name is Wanda Centeno, and I appear before you today as a concerned resident and advocate for the families who continue to live under circumstances that no Virgin Islander should be expected to endure.

For years, residents of LBJ Gardens have lived with uncertainty, health concerns, environmental hazards, and repeated promises that have yet to produce meaningful solutions. The people of this community have demonstrated patience, resilience, and cooperation. Unfortunately, government agencies have not demonstrated the same urgency.

The issues confronting LBJ Gardens extend far beyond aging housing stock. Residents live in close proximity to critical industrial infrastructure; the WAPA power plant, a Waste Management Authority sewage pump station, and a yacht manufacturing company (Gold Coast). All generating legitimate concerns regarding public health, safety, and quality of life.

These concerns include:

- The continued operation and maintenance challenges associated with nearby WAPA facilities including its propane tanks and the fear many residents have regarding their proximity to major utility infrastructure referred to as a blast zone.
- The proposed relocation project of Waste Management Authority.
- Persistent concerns surrounding Waste Management Authority facilities mechanical problems, odors, emissions, leaks, and environmental impacts.
- The proposed relocation and demolishment activities associated with the LBJ infrastructure projects from VI Housing Finance Authority (VIHFA).
- Air quality concerns related to industrial activities in the surrounding area.
- The deteriorated and abandoned government-owned structures located among occupied residences.

- Longstanding questions regarding environmental testing, health monitoring, and public transparency which was highlighted and made public during VI Housing Finance Authority illegal attempt of demolition.

Perhaps most troubling is that residents have repeatedly attended meetings, participated in community discussions, and listened to commitments from government officials, only to see little measurable progress until today.

In 2023, residents were informed that a buyout and relocation strategy was being considered. Specific discussions included financial assistance amounts that would allow families to relocate from an area increasingly viewed as unsuitable for long-term residential occupation. Yet months later at yet another meeting this was reneged. Since then, residents have watched as studies are announced, plans are discussed, consultants are retained, and meetings are held, while conditions on the ground remain largely unchanged. As time passes some residents have died, others have been placed in long-term care centers and the remaining are exactly where they were, still waiting for answers.

The result has been a growing erosion of public trust.

The people of LBJ Gardens nor any Virgin Islands resident should have to choose between protecting their health and maintaining a roof over their heads.

Today, I respectfully ask this Committee to exercise its oversight authority and require accountability from the agencies involved. Only a concerted effort between the Legislature and the Government of the Virgin Islands can make right the wrong that we are living.

1. Urgency and Fair Compensation for Residents

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Residents of LBJ Gardens understand that solving a problem of this magnitude requires legislative action, funding, planning, and coordination among multiple agencies. However, what residents can no longer accept is an open-ended process with no clear timeline for completion.

For many families, every passing day brings additional anxiety, uncertainty, and emotional distress. We worry about our health and of the elderly residents, the parents that we now take care of. And they in turn worry about whether they will live long enough to see a resolution. Homeowners continue to question the future value of the largest investment many have ever made.

The mental and emotional toll associated with years of uncertainty cannot be overstated.

Therefore, residents respectfully request that the legislation solution considers all necessary actions—including funding allocations, property acquisition, relocation assistance, environmental mitigation, and resident compensation—**be completed within six months or less.**

The people of LBJ Gardens have already waited years for relief. They should not be asked to wait years more.

This request is particularly important given that the 36th Legislature and the Government of the Virgin Islands current administration is approaching the end of its term. Residents want assurance that any solution adopted will not become another unfinished promise passed from one administration or legislature to the next. They deserve a clear implementation timeline with measurable milestones and public accountability.

2. Establish a Dedicated Funding Strategy

It is clear that government officials acknowledge that conditions warrant relocation, or property acquisition, then **funding must be identified and prioritized**. Funding sources must be made available for a buyout or relocation.

3. Replacement Value Rather Than Appraised Value

Additionally, residents strongly believe that any compensation program should be based on **replacement value rather than traditional appraised value**.

Many of the properties in and around LBJ Gardens have been negatively affected by decades of government decisions, infrastructure siting, industrial activity, environmental concerns, and public perception issues that have contributed to declining property values.

As a result, conventional appraisals may fail to reflect what it would actually cost a resident to purchase a comparable home elsewhere in the Virgin Islands.

It would be fundamentally unfair for residents to bear the financial consequences of conditions they did not create and over which they had no control. If government actions, government facilities, or government-approved activities contributed to the deterioration, stigma, or devaluation of this neighborhood, then residents should not be penalized through compensation formulas that rely solely on depressed market values.

A replacement-value approach would ensure that families have a realistic opportunity to obtain comparable housing and maintain the quality of life they would have enjoyed had these circumstances never occurred.

The goal should not merely be to compensate residents for what their property is worth today under distressed conditions. The goal should be to make residents whole.

4. Demolition

The abandoned public structures located within and around residential areas should not remain standing indefinitely. These structures create safety hazards, attract illegal activity, depress property values, and contribute to the perception that the government has abandoned the

community. However, **demolition of VI Housing Finance Authority abandoned structures should not take place while homeowners are within less than 10 feet away.**

Closing Remarks

Mr. Chairman, the residents of LBJ Gardens are not seeking a windfall. They are seeking fairness, dignity, and closure. They want the opportunity to move forward without carrying the financial burden of decisions made by others. They want a process that recognizes both the economic loss and the emotional hardship they have endured. Most importantly, they want certainty that this Legislature will act and that the solution adopted will be implemented promptly, not years into the future.

Too often, discussions about LBJ Gardens focus on agencies and projects. We must remember that behind every report is a family. Behind every delayed decision is a resident living with uncertainty. Behind every postponed solution is another year that people continue to wait.

I respectfully urge this Committee to use its budgetary and oversight authority to ensure that the concerns of LBJ Gardens are no longer deferred, delayed, or forgotten.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am available to answer any questions the Committee may have.

Respectfully Submitted,

Wanda Centeno

Resident of LBJ Gardens

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Before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance

36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
