



GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS OF THE UNITED STATES

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DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND NATURAL RESOURCES

4611 Tutu Park Mall
Suite 300, 2nd Floor
St. Thomas, VI 00802
(340) 774-3320

45 Mars Hill, Frederiksted
St. Croix, VI 00840
(340) 773-1082
dpnr.vi.gov



Office of the Commissioner

December 11, 2024

The Honorable Novelle E. Francis
President
5 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands

RE: UPDATE ON THE VI COMPREHENSIVE LAND & WATER USE PLAN

10 Good day Senate President Francis, other members of the 35th Legislature, legislative staff present, and members of the viewing and listening public, my name is Jean-Pierre L. Oriol, Commissioner for the Department of Planning & Natural Resources (DPNR). With me today are Mr. Marlon Hibbert, Director of CZM; Mrs. Leia LaPlace-Matthew, DPNR Territorial Planner; Mr. Nate Kelly from the Horsley Witten Group; Mr. John Woods, Managing Member of Jaredian Design Group and Mr. Clarence Browne, Managing Principal of Design District.
15 We are pleased to be before you today at the Chair’s request to present an update on DPNR’s efforts to formulate a Comprehensive Land & Water Use Plan submitted to the Legislature for its consideration and action

20 3 VIC § 402(a) established the Division of Planning within DPNR in 1987; one of the duties of the Planning Office, as specified under 3 VIC § 402(c), is to prepare and upon legislative approval issue and have in continuous process of revision, the long-range comprehensive plan of the US Virgin Islands – more commonly known as the Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan (Comp Plan). The legislation states that the plan shall identify and stress island-wide goals, objectives and opportunities, and then lists a number of factors to be considered
25 in the establishment of the plan.

30 Over the years I’ve heard a number of things attached to the Comp Plan, but I would like to review what our Comp Plan is – it is a shared vision for the USVI’s future that helps us make decisions about: what new development looks like and where it happens; how we balance competing uses for our land and waters; how to protect environmentally sensitive areas, waters, coastlines and historic sites; prioritizing future investments in community services and infrastructure; and it seeks to ensure that the land use decision-making process is fair, equitable and consistent. The Comp Plan is NOT a regulatory tool, but rather, a framework for how we make decisions. It shall provide long-range guidance for the physical, economic,
35 and social development of the territory.

40 DPNR started the process for completing the Comp Plan in October 2022 with a series of inter-governmental meetings to ensure we received buy-in for the effort and would be coordinating with other agency plans, such as transportation plans, Ag Plans, and housing plans, to name a few. We then began a series of public engagement town halls in February 2023, followed by town halls in July and November 2023, and most recently in June 2024. Over 1500 residents participated in the town halls over the last 18 months. In addition to the town halls, DPNR has engaged with 92 volunteers across the territory who have assisted with the process in three Working Groups representing St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas, ensuring

local input along the way. We have maintained an online presence at www.planusvi.com where we have kept all our documents and directed our sign-up list of over 700 residents to as we updated our materials.

5 We began the engagement process by asking our stakeholders to summarize where they think we are now and tell us what is important to them - what must be preserved. In our second round of town halls, we asked our residents to tell us what issues need to be addressed. Some of the more common things we heard were: no more spot zoning, eliminate the two-tier permitting system, more local control over land use decisions, protect beaches, guts, access to the shoreline, ground water and drinking water, make it easier and safer for
10 people to walk, and prioritize enforcement of laws and regulations. In the third round of town halls, we took the information from the first two rounds and developed guiding principles and policy directions and some preliminary goals. We brought these to the community, along with a visual example in each district of what locations could look like, incorporating some of the policy recommendations. The feedback was key in informing the
15 department as to whether we were capturing the vision of the community, or if we needed to reset. Thankfully, we received positive feedback and continued to move forward.

For our fourth round of town halls we developed four guiding themes of the Comp Plan – Making Better Land & Water Use Decisions; Protecting our Natural Resources; Preparing for
20 a More Sustainable Future; and Living & Thriving Together – and goals, policies and strategies under each theme; these are the core components of the draft plan. At our last round of town hall meetings, we engaged the public on two issues; first, to provide feedback on island-specific strategies (see slides), and second, to provide feedback on the policies and strategies for at least two thematic areas, or as many as could be collected as time permitted. The in-
25 person exercise was also intended to be training for the community to then provide additional feedback on the thematic areas not commented on during the in-person meeting, through our website. From August to September, we reviewed all the comments submitted, and in October we released the Draft VI Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan for public comment through December 5, 2024. Over the last week we've reviewed and incorporated
30 the comments, and we now present the VI Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan to the 35th Legislature for approval pursuant to 3 VIC § 402(c).

While we focus on establishing the framework/vision for the plan, we would also like to acknowledge the island-specific recommendations that were derived from our communities
35 for each of the main islands. For example, on St. John, there is an emphasis on establishing/re-establishing government services on government-owned property, and a desire to enhance Cruz Bay as a walkable town. On St. Croix, there are many more specific opportunities identified, from maximizing the potential for our food sovereignty to capitalizing fully on the National Heritage Area designation, highlighting the vast potential of the island. And lastly
40 for St. Thomas, with the limiting factor being the availability of land, the focus of the community is the redevelopment of our areas, incorporating a mix of uses, but using a watershed approach to alleviate some of the historical problems, such as flooding.

At this time, we would like to note that this iteration of the Comp Plan differs from the
45 previous attempts, as the past efforts included new zoning, subdivision and earth change regulations and was also accompanied by new land and water use maps. Those iterations focused on the intensity of uses, rather than what we have based this plan on – the establishment of a framework with guiding principles. Once adopted, the Department will embark strategically on updating laws and regulations that coincide with the framework to
50 be adopted. There will be scenario planning and lots of renderings, which will then result in the development of maps to reflect the zoning amendments/variances agreed upon.

5 I would like to conclude by thanking my staff who have been diligently working on this project from the draft of the Request for Proposals, to where we are presently. Mr. Keith Richards, Mr. Marlon Hibbert, Ms. Leia LaPlace-Matthew, Ms. Hilary Lohmann and, most recently, Ms. Jozette Walker have truly been a driving force within the Department pushing this initiative forward. I would like to thank the Horsley Witten Group and their local team for all the work done thus far on the plan. I would like to thank Ms. Nykole Tyson of NT Media for leading the promotion of the Town Halls. Lastly, I would like to thank the people of the Virgin Islands for providing their voice to this process. All along the way we stated that we
10 wanted this to be OUR Comp Plan, and we are appreciative of the support and input along the way. This has truly been an amazing, inclusive experience, and I am grateful for all the comments and dialogue that I've engaged with in our community.

15 Thank you for the opportunity to present this update. My team and I are here to answer your questions to the best of our ability.