



REZONING REQUEST TESTIMONY TO THE VI LEGISLATURE JUNE 9, 2023

RE: **Bill No. 35-0079** - Rezoning Request for #71 Estate Concordia West,
Frederiksted, St. Croix

Property Owner: Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands, Inc.

Good morning Honorable Senate President Francis, Esteemed Members of the Legislature, Ms. LaPlace Matthew, Territorial Planner of DPNR, and other Attendees of this Hearing,

I extend my warm greetings to all present. My name is Junia John-Straker, and I have the privilege of serving as the Chief Executive Officer of Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands, Inc. (LSSVI). Today, I appear before you with a humble request to consider the rezoning of Plot #71 Estate Concordia West, Frederiksted, St. Croix. Our objective is to transition the current zoning classification from R2 (Residential-Low Density-One and Two Family) to R-3 (Residential-Medium Density). This rezoning will provide us with the opportunity to construct a new group home, named Sister Emma Cottage, as a replacement for our existing facility on the Queen Louise Home for Children (QLH) campus.

Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands is the largest private non-profit agency dedicated to providing essential family and child services in the Virgin Islands. Each day, we offer support and assistance to over 300 individuals, including children, families, seniors, and individuals with disabilities, across our 11 program sites on St. Croix and St. Thomas. We consider it both an honor and a responsibility to offer love, shelter, and care to the most vulnerable members of our community, providing them with a safe and nurturing environment when they need it most.

The Sister Emma Cottage, located within the Queen Louise Home for Children campus, was originally constructed in the mid-1960s as the residence for the directors and their family. In the late 1980s, the cottage was converted and renamed Sister Emma Cottage in response to the increasing demand for residential foster placement of children with severe physical and developmental challenges. Many of the children under our care at Sister Emma Cottage rely on wheelchairs and require extensive medical support. Our dedicated caregivers work tirelessly every day, offering love, care, and support to our residents, helping them reach their fullest potential. **It is important to note that all placements at the Cottage are made through the V.I. Department of Human Services.**

During the devastating hurricanes Irma and Maria, our island experienced torrential rains that resulted in the flooding of Sister Emma Cottage. In response, our staff promptly evacuated the children to one of our Early Head Start classrooms on the Queen Louise Home campus. Given the complexity of their disabilities, evacuating these children posed significant challenges and potential risks. Unfortunately, the floodwaters caused damage to their personal belongings, including clothing, toys, and medical supplies. Additionally, the Cottage itself suffered losses, such as furniture, appliances, and hospital beds. The floodwater even reached and inundated the Cottage's ADA transport van.

The flooding exacerbated the pre-existing hurricane damage to Sister Emma's Cottage. Even with moderate rainfall, water seeps through the tiles and floors. Heavy rain now requires our staff to regularly mop the floors, and extra caution must be exercised while maneuvering the children's wheelchairs. It became evident that relocating Sister Emma's Cottage away from its current proximity to the flood-prone area is essential for ensuring the long-term safety of the children, particularly during future hurricanes or heavy rainfall. LSSVI applied for and was approved for a grant from The Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery (CBDG-DR) to rebuild Sister Emma's Cottage at a new location on the Queen Louise Home campus.

The Queen Louise Home property was rezoned in 1971 as R-2 Residential-Low Density, allowing for one and two-family residences. The campus, spanning 9.99 acres, currently accommodates the following structures:

- Two Cottages providing a home for children who have experienced abuse, abandonment, neglect, or require respite care.
- An administrative building, housing staff offices, a commercial kitchen, and maintenance space.
- An Early Head Start program serving 48 families, including 24 infants and toddlers at the Center, 12 infants and toddlers in our home-based program, and 12 pregnant women.
- A trailer serving as offices for the Early Head Start program.
- Lastly, the Sister Emma Cottage, offering 24-hour residential foster care to children and young adults with severe developmental and physical challenges. Our intention is to replace this building with a new structure, pending approval of the rezoning.

In conclusion, I kindly request your favorable consideration of the rezoning application for Plot #71 Estate Concordia West, Frederiksted, St. Croix, from R2 to R-3. This rezoning will empower Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands, Inc. to construct a new Sister Cottage, serving as a replacement for the current Sister Emma Cottage, which is prone to flooding on the Queen Louise Home for Children campus. Your support will make a significant contribution to the safety, well-being, and future of the children and young adults with severe challenges under our care.

Thank you for your attention, and I am more than happy to address any questions or concerns that may arise.

Respectfully submitted,



Julia John-Straker
Chief Executive Officer
Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands, Inc.