

Testimony to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary
35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Carlos Robles, Nominee
Virgin islands Conservation District Board

Greetings to you the Honorable, Diane T. Capehart, chair, and the other members of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, other senators present and to the listening and viewing audience. My name is Carlos Robles and I appear before this committee at your invitation, as a nominee to the Virgin Islands Conservation District board (hereafter referred to as the District board), representing the district of St. Thomas. I would like to thank the Honorable Albert Bryan for affording me this opportunity and privilege to continue to serve the people of the Virgin Islands in this capacity.

My earliest knowledge of the function of the District board came from a conversation with Mr. Hans Lawaetz of Annaly Farms early in my term as Commissioner of the VI Department of Agriculture (VIDA). His description of the impact of the District board on the management our precious natural resources made me realize that this board must be resurrected.

Nationally, conservation districts provide the following:

1. Non-regulatory services tailored to meet the needs of local people, local properties and natural resources
2. Site specific plans for properties designed to help landowners and managers achieve land use and conservation goals
3. Grant funding and free or low-cost services to assist landowners and managers to take action that makes our land air water and natural habitats healthier for all
4. Technical expertise for project planning, and construction.

All conservation district boards come under the umbrella of the National Association of Conservation Districts here in after referred to as the NACD.

As an example of the scope and magnitude of the District board, the Earth Change permitting process that is currently administered by the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, was developed and managed by the District board back in 1972. That responsibility was eventually assumed by the Coastal Zone Management Commission in the mid 1980's. Many of the water storage dams, strategically positioned around the Virgin Islands were planned and approved by the District board and constructed in partnership with the USDA Soil Conservation Service led at the time by Mr. Ted Johnson.

It is unknown when the District board officially disbanded, but for at least the last 35 -40 years, there has been no activity. In its absence there was at least one local entity, the Virgin Islands Resource Conservation and Development Council (VI RC&D) , that developed and executed

conservation projects and programs that benefited the agriculture community specifically, and the wider Virgin Islands community on a whole.

The VI RC&D Council no longer is active, however the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) continues to provide funding, financial support, and technical assistance to the people of the Virgin Islands for efficient and effective natural resource management. Ideally, the planning, selection, development and execution of any project, should be done in consultation with and at direction of the local conservation District board. This is not how the process is operating currently.

The good news is that we are on the road to resurrecting this valuable resource. The NACD has re-established a presence in the Virgin Islands.

During my tenure as Commissioner of Agriculture in the aftermath of hurricanes Irma and Maria, we spent countless days in dialog with local and national USDA representatives attempting to find assistance for the decimated agriculture community. It was during those trying times that I connected with the leadership of the NACD with assistance of Mr. Carlos Suarez, the liaison to the Secretary of Agriculture. After many telephone conversations, NACD funded two (2) district conservationist, positioned in the VI Department of Agriculture (VIDA). The primary goal of the district conservationist was then and continues today, to work with the VIDA to resurrect the District board. However, any and all other opportunities for financial assistance were stymied by the lack of a local District board through whom the NRCS and NACD could liaison.

Along with past District board Chairman Lawaetz, I am familiar with and have had brief conversations with two current members of the District board, Dale Brown, and Diane Brooks. As an aside in August of 2023, I was inducted into the NACD Southeast Region Conservation Hall of Fame for my 30 + years of work in the agriculture community of the Virgin Islands. If selected, the knowledge and experience acquired over the course of those 30 + years will be available to the District board, the local and national USDA partners on behalf of the agriculture community specifically and the people of the Virgin Islands as a whole. If I were to make one recommendation to this body, irrespective of my selection or not, that recommendation would be to appropriate funding for inter-island and national travel and part-time secretarial services. According to past chairman, they were allotted \$5000.00 for the functioning of the District board back in the 1980's and 90's. Given the increased cost of travel locally and nationally, a sum of \$40,000 – \$45,000 should be adequate.

I am truly thankful for the work of the staff at the VIDA in moving this process along to this point. Thank you for the invitation to appear before this committee and I look forward to responding to your questions at this time.