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Diane T. Capehart

Committee on Rules and Judiciary


Senator, 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands

Dear Senator Capehart, members of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, and the people of the United States Virgin Islands:

It is with great honor that I accept the nomination by Governor Albert Bryan to become a member of the Board of Supervisors on the Virgin Islands Conservation District. I am here before you today to get your vote of approval. I wish to join this esteemed group of conservation experts and officials. As you see with my provided resume and the following testimony, I am uniquely qualified for this position. I have demonstrated over the past 20 years my professional devotion to the conservation of natural and cultural resources in my home, the United States Virgin Islands.

Many people know me as a farmer. However, like most of my fellow farmers, I am more than that. I approach farming as a productive tool for regenerative conservation. Over the past 3 decades I have cultivated an expertise in natural resource ecological planning and management, research & education, and have accomplished many relevant projects here in the Virgin Islands. Now, I would like to share some of my relevant professional highlights and some examples about what I hope to accomplish as a member of the VICD.

I have been nominated for a non-farmer position, given my Ph.D. education and working experience in natural resource management and forestry in the Virgin Islands. In the past decade I have been writing plans for the Department of Agriculture for the VI Forest Legacy areas, including North Star and Inner Brass Island management plans. My background of research and my professional career has included leading conservation projects such as recreational trail studies, natural resource impact assessment and monitoring, and regenerative organic agriculture practices. My farm Ridge to Reef, on two sites in St. Croix including 150 acres, is the only certified organic farm in the VI. The name Ridge to Reef is all about the interconnections of soils and water -what we do




on the land inevitably impacts the water as it flows downward to the sea and it connects our tiny island to the entire world. Working along with partner farms and NGOs like the VI Farmers Alliance and VI Good Food, I have helped farming become more profitable by helping re-start the territory's Farm to School program in 2014, which is growing every year in volume while encouraging farmers to implement sustainable production practices. I believe, and have seen with my own eyes, that not only can we return to a more healthy and inspiring natural environment, but we can do so while making money and feeding our children the best foods possible.

As elected president of the VI Farmers Alliance, I have co-written grants that have secured over \$300,000 in the past 4 years to support farmers in more successful production and marketing while using environmentally beneficial methods. On such initiative is the Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) and another are producer grants from the Sustainable Agriculture, Research and Education (SARE), both supported by the USDA. I also forged relationships to help implement World Central Kitchen's Plow to Plate program that provided hundreds of thousands of dollars to farms and farmer organizations to improve our food system resiliency. After Hurricanes Irma and Maria, I worked with the Trees That Feed Foundation to obtain and distribute over 3000 breadfruit trees across the VI. Academically, My PhD dissertation was centered on the assessment of the feasibility of St. Croix becoming a National Heritage Area (NHA), which was eventually designated as such by Present Biden in January 2023.

I look forward to joining the VICD in order to further protect and benefit our precious natural resources through productive conservation initiatives and policy recommendations to relevant agencies. Indeed, this should be done in a manner that supports landowners and tenants in implementing positive environmental stewardship practices. These can help fill our aquifers with clean water, protect our soils and coral reefs from excessive erosion and pollution, and at the same time make it economically beneficial for the territory.

First, I plan on making specific recommendations that will update VI legal code Title 7: Agriculture; Chapter 3. Soil Conservation, since the VICD has been inactive for a number of years. For example, the practice of on-contour sub-soiling in appropriate areas was implemented under the Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP) to shatter hardpans created by tillage and development and improve water infiltration into the ground water table to reduce run-off and flooding. This practice was encouraged by up to \$5,000 per farmer per year. However, this amount was established nearly 60 years ago in 1964. Adjusted with inflation over time that is now valued over \$48,000, which is the kind of money required to support such activities that may return farms into units of environmental regeneration. This and many other updates are necessary.

Second, I wish to help network the VICD with conservation districts around the country -including fellow territories and insular areas with similar circumstances to help foster good ideas for the VI. Additionally, there are pools of existing funding nationally reserved for conservation districts that can be tapped to support conservation actions in the VI. One such example is the set



of technical assistance grants available from the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), which last year offered \$15 million and has updated their reach to serve new and underserved producers in a partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Finally, I look forward on intertwining conservation efforts with recently approved positive initiatives in the VI that promote natural and cultural heritage conservation and agriculture. One is the St. Croix National Heritage Area (NHA) designation by the US Congress and another is the VI Agricultural Plan (VIAP). As a nominee I have extensive experience with both, since helping the National Park Service design and conduct the award-winning community-based feasibility study for the NHA and while serving as a task force member in the drafting of the VIAP. I see clear ways on how we can successfully leverage federal and local resources to help these and other related industries that together will lead to a more healthy and ecologically productive environment, while preserving the unique cultural heritage of the VI.

Thank for your consideration for the position and I am at here your disposal for any further information that you require.

In humble gratitude, \_\_\_\_\_



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