



Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism, Inc.

217 Custom House Street
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January 28, 2026

Senator Marise C. James, Chair
Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure & Planning meeting
Legislature of the Virgin Islands of the U.S.
3022 Estate Golden Rock
Christiansted, United States Virgin Islands 00820

RE: "Heirs Property, Prolonged Probate, and Vacant & Abandoned Historic Properties in the U.S. Virgin Islands."

Honorable Senator Marise C. James, Members of the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure & Planning, Senators and guests. Thank you for the invitation to testify on this important issue.

Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism, Inc. (CHANT) is committed to preserving Crucian culture and heritage and promoting sustainable community development with a focus on tourism, traditional skills, and heritage-focused workforce development. Since the mid- 2000s CHANT has built a network of world class local tourism providers and programs and has provided workforce development training to more than fifty (50) young Virgin Islanders.

The CHANT historic preservation project, Invisible Heritage: Identity Memory and Our Town – Free Gut Project and Building Arts Institute addresses the long-term problems of abandoned and derelict historic buildings in the town of Frederiksted on the island of St. Croix. This project focuses on the revitalization of the historic Free Gut neighborhood in Frederiksted and the development of a cadre of skilled artisanal craftspeople to restore the historical buildings.

The project addresses:

- 1) Preservation of family (heirs) ownership
- 2) Job training and job placement
- 3) Preservation of traditional folk art and artistry
- 4) Restoration of significant vernacular buildings
- 5) Community engagement and support
- 6) Environmental and Economic Sustainability



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Our restoration projects center the owners as participants Utilizing lease agreements, conservation easements and other legal tools, CHANT has been able to facilitate the restoration while protecting intergenerational ownership.

For many families, the number of owners must first be established. The creation of family trees – tracing the lineage of owners – enables the identification and engagement of persons who are heirs. This requires time, dedication and resources. The use of family corporations and family trusts can protect all heirs, clear titles and facilitate probate.

The current “crisis” we are facing is fueled by the systemic disinvestment in the historic towns coupled with the disinvestment in the people who live in the towns. This must be reversed. Today, resources abound for developers flying into access “recovery” funds yet, this body has not fully engaged with the communities to identify ways to restore the remaining vernacular buildings and other historic properties in the towns. I encourage that we meet in and with the community, to brainstorm progressive actions that can be taken to stem the tide of destruction by storms, neglect and disinvestment and create investment tools that will foster economic activity, revitalize our towns and preserve local ownership. We can replace destitution and neglect with vibrant, locally owned and occupied spaces that honor the sacrifices of our Ancestors and that showcases their creativity and perseverance.

What can we do?

- 1) Commit to action that is focused on community revitalization and preservation of family ownership
- 2) Provide funding for technical assistance to families including legal costs, design, planning, etc.
- 3) Support NGO’s doing the work
- 4) Create mechanisms for channeling funding to restoration of family-owned property
- 5) Acknowledge the threat of gentrification and the need to proactively counter those threats

Alternative systems to promote the preservation of the built heritage and our culture exist and can be adapted to the Virgin Islands. See the below Example:

Alternatives

1 – Preservation Trust

The Guam Preservation Trust (the Trust) was created in 1990 as a non-profit, public corporation



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governed by a Board of Directors. It is dedicated to preserving Guam's historic sites and culture as well as educating the public about those issues. Although primarily tasked with restoring historic

structures, which are listed in the Guam Register of Historic Places and/or the National Register of Historic Places, the Guam Preservation Trust also supports various types of heritage projects. Trust is a 501(c) 3 Non-profit Corporation comprised of ten board members representing five disciplines (Archaeology, Architecture, Chamorro Culture, Community Planning, and History)

The Trust was created for the following purposes:

- To seek grants and donations;*
- To **acquire title to threatened Guam properties** for the preservation of their value whether in fee simple, leasehold, or by easement, through donation, transfer, dedication, purchase and eminent domain;*
- To award grants for archaeological investigations;*
- To prepare a Guam Preservation Trust Master Plan (the Plan) identifying by order of priority, the buildings, structures and sites which in the opinion of the Trust are deserving of preservation and which shall be preserved. The Trust shall hold a public hearing on the proposed plan and shall transmit the Plan to I Liheslaturan Guahan sixty (60) days prior to its implementation; and*
- To support other activities directly related to increasing public appreciation of and benefit from historical places.*

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my written testimony, I am sorry that I was not able to participate in person and I look forward to continuing this open dialogue to help address the needs of our community and to align resources with solutions.

Respectfully,

Franelle Gerard

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Executive Director



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