

*Testimony of
Vincent Richards*

*Assistant Commissioner of the Department of Property and Procurement
On behalf of*

Lisa M. Alejandro
Commissioner of the Department of Property & Procurement

On

*“Heirs Property, Prolonged Probate, and Vacant & Abandoned Historic Properties in the U.S.
Virgin Islands.”*

Before

Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure & Planning Meeting

Thursday, January 29, 2026

***Frits E. Lawaetz Legislative Conference Room
ST. CROIX, U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS***

Good Afternoon, Committee Chair Marise C. James, Esq., Vice-Chair Milton E. Potter, Committee members, Honorable Senators, Angel L. Bolques, Dwayne M. DeGraff, Hubert L. Frederick, Clifford A. Joseph and Kurt A. Vialet, Non-Committee members, Central and Legislative Staff, fellow testifiers, visitors present in the chambers, and members of the viewing and listening audience.

I am Vincent Richards, Assistant Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Property and Procurement (Department). I appear today on behalf of Commissioner, Lisa M. Alejandro, to offer testimony to this Committee.

The Department of Property and Procurement appreciates the Committee's decision to convene this hearing to examine the challenges associated with unresolved heirs' property and prolonged probate, and the broader impact these issues have on vacant, abandoned, and deteriorating properties—many of which hold historic, cultural, or community significance.

While heirs' property and probate challenges primarily affect privately held land, the condition and utilization of government-owned properties play a critical role in stabilizing neighborhoods, revitalizing town centers, and setting an example for responsible land stewardship.

The Department of Property and Procurement is statutorily charged with the custody, management, leasing, maintenance, and disposition of real property owned by the Government of the Virgin Islands (GVI). This responsibility includes ensuring that government-owned properties are properly inventoried, adequately insured against risk, maintained to the extent resources allow, and utilized in a manner that supports both governmental operations and broader public policy objectives.

The Department works in close coordination with other agencies, including the Office of the Governor, the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR), the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), and the Legislature, particularly when properties are located within designated historic districts or are subject to special regulatory or preservation requirements.

The Department maintains an inventory of government-owned properties throughout the Territory, including properties located in historic towns and commercial corridors such as Charlotte Amalie, Cruz Bay, Christiansted, and Frederiksted. These properties include facilities actively used for governmental purposes, as well as properties that are underutilized due to space constraints, deferred maintenance, ADA compliance requirements, changing agency needs, lack of adequate parking, or other limiting factors. Additionally, some properties are currently vacant or abandoned.

Several vacant and underutilized properties are located within designated historic districts and may possess architectural, cultural, or community significance. Many face serious challenges, including

structural deterioration due to age, hurricane impacts, prolonged exposure to the elements, and limited funding for routine maintenance and capital improvements.

The Department acknowledges that prolonged vacancy of government-owned properties can contribute to blight, negatively affect public safety, and discourage private investment in surrounding areas. Accordingly, the Government of the Virgin Islands continues to evaluate government-owned properties in town areas to determine the most appropriate and productive uses.

Where feasible, properties are retained and rehabilitated for continued governmental operations, including office space and the delivery of public services. In other cases, the Government supports the adaptive reuse of historic properties for cultural, educational, or community-oriented purposes, provided such uses are consistent with applicable preservation guidelines. The Department also facilitates interagency transfers of properties to agencies with demonstrated programmatic needs and the capacity to rehabilitate and maintain those assets.

In appropriate circumstances, the Government explores long-term leasing arrangements and public-private partnerships that allow properties to be rehabilitated and activated while preserving public ownership. Where a property is no longer needed for public use and is suitable for transfer, the Department may recommend disposition in accordance with statutory requirements and subject to legislative approval.

In 2023, the Department completed the rehabilitation of a portion of Parcel No. 48B Norre Gade, converting it into a Visitors Center and Public Restroom. In 2025, after extended negotiations, the Department executed a long-term lease agreement with a nonprofit organization for the remaining portion of Parcel No. 48B Norre Gade, with plans underway for its multimillion-dollar development into a Museum and Cultural Center.

The Department is currently processing several long-term lease agreements for Government of the Virgin Islands-owned properties located within the historic districts on all three islands. These properties are planned for redevelopment into retail, office, and residential uses, including an indoor cultural market and additional public restroom facilities, to support economic activity, historic preservation, and public access.

The Department faces challenges consistent with those raised in this hearing, including limited funding for rehabilitation and maintenance, the high cost of restoring historic structures, and the need for clearer and more streamlined policies governing the reuse, leasing, and disposition of government-owned historic properties. Enhanced interagency coordination, targeted funding mechanisms, and legislative support are critical to addressing these challenges effectively.

In closing, the Department of Property and Procurement recognizes the importance of addressing vacant, abandoned, and underutilized properties as part of a comprehensive strategy to revitalize the historic towns and commercial corridors of the Virgin Islands. We remain committed to working collaboratively with the Legislature, sister agencies, developers, and community stakeholders to develop practical legal, administrative, and policy solutions that promote responsible property management, historic preservation, and economic revitalization.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony. I am prepared to answer any questions the Committee may have.

Government of the Virgin Islands Owned Property
Located in the Historic Districts and require extensive renovation.

Frederiksted, St. Croix

30, 30-C, 30-A 30 31 32-A & 32-B Strand Street
22 to 25 & 26-A Strand Street

Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas

9A 9B 10A & 10B Kronprindsens Gade
No. 81A & B Kronprindsens Gade
No. 74B & 75 Kronprindsens Gade
No. 37, 38 & 39 Norre Gade
No 38 & No. 40 Kongens Gade
No. 1 Torvet Straede
No. 1-3 Crystal Gade
No. 2A Commandant Gade
No. 1 Fortets Staede
