



UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS

# Economic Development Authority

WAYNE BIGGS, JR.  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
VIRGIN ISLANDS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

## TESTIMONY BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON DISASTER RECOVERY, INFRASTRUCTURE AND PLANNING

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

-----  
JANUARY 29, 2026

1           Good day Senator Marise C. James, Chairwoman, committee members, senators of the  
2    36<sup>th</sup> Legislature, the legislative staff, the Virgin Islands Economic Development Authority team,  
3    and the listening and viewing public. I am Wayne Biggs, Jr., Chief Executive Officer of the U.S.  
4    Virgin Islands Economic Development Authority (hereafter referred to as “EDA” or “the  
5    Authority”).

6

7           I would like to thank the Committee Chair and members of the Committee on Disaster  
8    Recovery, Infrastructure and Planning for inviting me to provide testimony at todays hearing  
9    regarding the challenges associated with unresolved heirs property and prolonged probate,  
10   particularly where such delays contribute to vacant, abandoned, and deteriorating historic  
11   properties, and to identify practical legal, administrative, and policy solutions.

12

13    Virgin Islands Economic Development Authority (USVIEDA)

14           The USVIEDA is the umbrella organization which assumes, integrates, and unifies the  
15    functions of the following subsidiary entities: the Economic Development Bank (“EDB”), the  
16    Economic Development Commission (“EDC”), the Enterprise Zone Commission (“EZC”), and the  
17    Economic Development Park Corporation (“EDPC”). It is a semi-autonomous governmental  
18    instrumentality responsible for the development, promotion and enhancement of the economy  
19    of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

20

21           EDA promotes the development and diversification of the Territorial economy and  
22    creates opportunities for the gainful employment of residents. It also promotes access to capital,

23 contributes to the development of the educational system, and preserves the environment,  
24 beauty, and natural resources of the Territory. We are a customer service-based organization  
25 that creates positive public/private sector partnerships to promote economic growth, meet the  
26 challenges of the global economy and serve the needs of the business community, while  
27 embracing our unique heritage and preserving our pristine natural environment.

28

29 Under the direction of the governing board and hard work of our EDA team, the Authority  
30 through its four (4) main pillars: the EDB, the EDC, the EZC, and the EDPC, facilitates economic  
31 growth, job creation and retention, and wealth generation.

32

33 The Committee's invitation requested that the Authority provide its "assessment of how  
34 vacant and abandoned historic properties affect economic revitalization, small business  
35 development, heritage tourism, and housing supply, as well as barriers heirs face in qualifying for  
36 EDA programs due to unclear ownership." Additionally, Committee expressed its" interest in how  
37 unresolved property title and prolonged probate prevent property owners from accessing  
38 economic development incentives, financing, and redevelopment programs."

39

40 **1. What are the challenges associated with unresolved heirs' property and prolonged**  
41 **probate, particularly where such delays contribute to vacant abandoned and deteriorating**  
42 **historic properties?**

43 There are several challenges that contribute to vacant, abandoned and deteriorating historic  
44 properties as a result of unclear property title because of unresolved and/or prolonged probate:

45

46 (a) The Inability to Secure Funding for Maintenance and/or Repairs: Even if some heirs are  
47 willing to invest, they often cannot obtain loans or grants for necessary repairs or  
48 improvements because they do not possess clear, singular ownership of the property.  
49 This financial barrier is a major reason why historic buildings, despite potential interest  
50 from some owners, remain unfixed and deteriorate.

51

52 (b) The Exponential Increase in the Number of Heirs: Over generations, the number of heirs  
53 can grow from a couple to a few to several to dozens or even hundreds. It makes it  
54 difficult to locate and notify heirs. And if you are able to locate and notify, it makes  
55 achieving consensus on property management, repairs, or sale virtually impossible,  
56 leaving historic properties in limbo and susceptible to decay.

57

58 (c) The Impact on Community Revitalization and Heritage Tourism: Vacant and abandoned  
59 historic properties directly hinder efforts to revitalize distressed communities and detract  
60 from the aesthetic and cultural value of historic districts. This negatively impacts heritage  
61 tourism, which relies on the preservation and appeal of these unique historical assets.

62

63 (d) The High Upfront Costs of Probate: Probate itself is not cheap, and if an estate is not  
64 liquid, family members or the executor often have to pay upfront for the costs and the  
65 attorney's fees. This financial burden can deplete resources that might otherwise be used  
66 for property maintenance or as an initial investment required for redevelopment  
67 programs.

68

69 (e) Other challenges include disinheriting of Virgin Islanders from heritage properties  
70 (opposite of wealth building), higher level of crimes of opportunity, homeless squatting,  
71 etc.

72

73 **2. How does vacant and abandoned historic properties affect economic revitalization,  
74 small business development, heritage tourism, and housing supply, as well as the barriers heir  
75 face in qualifying for EDA programs due to unclear ownership.**

76

77 (a) In a survey conducted in the enterprise zones during the summer 2025, it was found that  
78 of the \_\_\_\_\_ properties reviewed, 92 buildings were in need of full rehabilitation and  
79 many others are in need of some form of maintenance or rehabilitation.

80

81 (b) The presence of vacant buildings hinders the revitalization of those areas and the positive  
82 growth of the economy that the EDA aims to achieve. More directly it hinders the ability  
83 for business and residential activity to take place in our historic districts due aesthetics of  
84 the buildings/area from the lack of investment in those properties.

85

86       **3. What are the existing EDA tools that could support adaptive reuse of historic**  
87       **properties once the title issues are resolved?**

88

89       (a) Enterprise Zone Commission (EZC) Initiatives: The EZC's core mission is to revitalize  
90       distressed communities and get vacant buildings active again. The EZC can provide tax  
91       incentive benefits to property owners and/or businesses that rehabilitate historic  
92       buildings. Depending on the EZC qualifying program, EZC tax incentives can be in the form  
93       of tax credits and/or tax reduction.

94

95       (b) EDB Initiatives: The EDB core mission is to provide access to capital for small businesses.  
96       Small business owners can use qualifying loan funds to finance the rehabilitation, the  
97       retrofit, or the purchase of a historic building to house or that houses their business.

98       (c) EDC Initiatives: The EDC core mission is to attract investment and create jobs throughout  
99       the Territory. EDC Beneficiaries can and do purchase historic properties and rehabilitate  
100       them to locate their business within the buildings, thereby creating renewed activity  
101       within the area.

102

103       (d) VI Slice Program: The VI Slice Program core mission is to provide gap financing to first time  
104       homeowners. This program could potentially offer financing or support for  
105       redevelopment efforts for residential activity.

106

107 (e) Quest 360 Program (An EDA collaboration program of the EDB's Incubator Program and  
108 EZC's Accelerator Program): This program provides technical assistance to support small  
109 business to grow.

110

111 **4. What has the EDA & EZC done to resolve issues in heirs' property prolonged probate  
112 and vacant and abandoned historic properties?**

113

114 EDA-EZC have undertaken several initiatives to address the challenges posed by heirs'  
115 property, prolonged probate, and vacant/abandoned historic properties. Their efforts primarily  
116 focus on education, community engagement, and advocating for solutions.

117

118 (a) Conference. The EZC has organized and relaunched free estate planning conferences  
119 to share invaluable information about estate planning options and the probate  
120 process in the U.S. Virgin Islands. These conferences aim to educate the public,  
121 especially residents and business owners within enterprise zones, on the importance  
122 of planning the transfer of personal and real property. These conferences have been  
123 held in multiple locations, including St. Thomas and St. Croix, and have been  
124 livestreamed on Facebook and broadcasted on radio to reach a wider audience. At  
125 these conferences, legal counsels discuss probate issues and provide expert  
126 information to attendees, including indebt discussion on trusts versus wills.

127

128 (b) Webpage. The EZC has created a page on the EDA's website, [www.usvieda.org](http://www.usvieda.org), that  
129 allows anyone to enter a question and get a response based information provided by  
130 the legal counsels at the EDA's Estate Planning Conferences. This gives someone a  
131 starting place in a private space to start their journey of dealing with this difficult  
132 process.

133

134 (c) Direct Assistance. Through a pilot program funded by a grant from the Department  
135 of Interior, the EZC has directly assisted several families in resolving their estate  
136 panning /probate issues. These will be presented as potential best practices on how  
137 to look at certain issues.

138

139 (d) Rejuvenations. In the past 12 months the EZC has completed 11 rejuvenations.

140

141 (e) Grants. Grant funding secured by the EDA team supports key areas such as business  
142 expansion, entrepreneurship, job creation, and long-term wealth-building across the  
143 Territory, positioning the Authority to deliver sustained impact and opportunity for  
144 Virgin Islands residents.

145

146 Through these multifaceted efforts, the team at the EDA is working to empower property  
147 owners and heirs with the knowledge and potential resources needed to resolve title issues,

148 navigate probate, and contribute to the revitalization of historic properties and distressed  
149 neighborhoods.

150

151           Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the assessment of how vacant and  
152 abandoned historic properties affect economic revitalization, small business development,  
153 heritage tourism, and housing supply, as well as barriers heirs face in qualifying for EDA programs  
154 due to unclear ownership. I am available to answer any questions you may have related to my  
155 testimony.