

Good afternoon, Senator Marise James, Chairwoman of the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure & Planning, other members of the committee, fellow testifiers, and the viewing and listening audience.

My name is Robert “Bobby” Schuster, and I am a ninth-generation Crucian and a Vietnam veteran who spent 36 years engaged in knowledge and skills transfer with the Det of ED.

I am here to try and add some context as to why our historic structures need to be reconstructed and preserved and why the owners needs help from multiple sources to assist in this effort.

As our Virgin Islands identity continues to erode daily I can recall that at the Saturday market held in Shan Market [Square](#), we could tell where a person lived on St. Croix just by their inflections when they spoke—whether from the La Valle side, Grove Place, Spanish Town, Bethlehem, or the West End. We used to say their twang was different. These things can be told and written about, but such experiences can only be lived, for there is no way to bring them back. St. Croix now has a blended culture and society, and we should do our best to hold on to some of our traditions, or they [too will](#) disappear. [My](#) interest was piqued [even more](#) by my father’s words and [the way](#) he spoke of the beauty of St. Croix, the character of [its](#) people, and how generous and respectful they were with one another. [Even](#) though they [did not](#) have much for themselves, they shared. He

said the fabric of those people is the backbone of our island—always trust and respect them. They very much have earned it and are the elders from whom **we should** learn. I remember some of those interactions between my father and those individuals, and I'll say in this hall today, without any fear of contradiction, that that kind of fabric no longer exists within our community. Those characteristics are gone, lost forever—a true shame. But thankfully, I was able to experience some of that living history and the sweetness of being able to mingle and exchange among such treasures.

I deeply believe that the lack of historical knowledge and understanding of our towns by individuals who have held the positions of Commissioner of Public Works and Director of Planning has led to questionable decisions about unnecessary changes to our towns' infrastructure—decisions that still affect how they function today and into the future. More so are the ones that have been neglected, that someday in the future may cause unnecessary fatalities because individuals don't know they exist, and the fact that the VI government does little maintenance and only hesitantly reacts after the fact. Christiansted and Frederiksted each have a clear, distinct historical character and legacy not found anywhere else in the Caribbean, but human neglect has been the biggest culprit. Thus, in a sense, our architectural legacy should be regarded as a Crucian cultural characteristic. Our Crucianism must be truthful and authentic so that our population will take pride in what they own and strive to refurbish them. So let's start at the beginning to set our history on the right course and commit to accurate knowledge

transfer. Virgin Islanders should be able to present ourselves with irrefutable confidence and not be hesitant when asked a question, but with certainty. We cannot present inaccuracies as facts or historic

I therefore recommend that we start by correcting some of our past errors to truly preserve our authentic history by first amending Bill # 4705, 1970. Although well-intended in creating a symbol for the office of Governor, it is not accurate. Five of the eight discs show incorrect flags; additionally, Germany never held any sovereignty over any of the islands. Let me explain.

[slide 1]

Additionally, the Department of Tourism was using the wrong flags in their advertising & media, which was contradictory to historical facts. We were putting forth a bad image, like we didn't know our own history. Only the Caravelle Hotel has been flying the correct flags.

Our towns have withstood centuries of hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Our architecture—a fusion of European, African, and Caribbean construction methods, using discarded ship ballast bricks and materials grown and extracted from our natural environment—offers valuable lessons in resilience for communities elsewhere and especially in tornado-prone regions. St. Croix is blessed with two of the most picturesque historic towns in the Caribbean, especially as seen from the sea. Our architecture has a distinctive character found nowhere else in the region, and this traditional form should serve as the standard for all

new construction in the territory, but more so on St. Croix to maintain our historical flavor and as an attraction to historical buffs and potential students in our unique architectural style, craftsmanship, and trade crafts which VIAC is trying to foster and preserve. VIAC is a private group of natives, adopted Crucians and residents who are trying to preserve an important part of our own history and culture, which our own government has seriously neglected to do, but is being done by the private sector. Just look at Whim, our historic museum, a perfect example of our inability to self-govern or self-secure our own history. Our government is in shambles, and Estate Whim epitomizes that fact ever so clearly.

St. Croix is a designated National Heritage Area, and we should use that status as a powerful tool to guide redevelopment in the image of our historic structural character and architectural style. As part of our planning, all new structures or redeveloped buildings within our towns should at a minimum, reflect this style in their façades. What we have on this island is so unique in character that we should not only do our utmost to preserve and protect it, but also to expand on it.

I have a collection of photographs that capture the engineering aesthetic of the time, that clearly show what we had, and illuminate how we altered or eliminated it—often not in our best interest—to preserve or repair authentic historical infrastructure. Some of these can be viewed on a YouTube presentation.

SLIDE 2 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NV_neIXGFE)

Clearly visible in these photographs is how extensively the street drainage has been altered, now causing frequent flooding of streets and structures.

[slide 3],

They also show how the streets have been elevated, in some cases by more than two feet, impacting building foundations and yard drainage.

[slide 4},

Yards that were once above street level are now below it, adding to flooding conditions created by government actions that disregarded property rights and the quality of life for homeowners.

[slide 5]

These arbitrary actions, undertaken without an understanding of why the original designers of our towns did things as they did, have caused citizens unnecessary expense. These practices must be stopped—and perhaps even codified—if we are to preserve our unique identity and heritage. This must be regarded as a critical Crucian infrastructural artisan legacy that should and must be preserved. Where did all the cannons that highlighted our intersections go? Most intersections had four. Beyond our historic district, we have wonderful bungalows that are charming, small, single-story homes with sloped roofs and some with small verandas suitable for young families or single units. I think these should also be preserved because they present another unique feature of our architectural legacy and preserve the character of our town. In the heart of Houston in a section called “The Heights” is an example of the preservation of such structures. Down in Galveston, the community engaged in the restoration of such buildings. Key West did a great job, so why can’t we replicate what others have done so successfully to preserve a part of their storied history?

Yes, the government should encourage and provide funding, but can it—or at least funding guarantees—for the reconstruction of properties. But the government should also conduct itself, and shape its planning practices, in ways that support and advance these reconstruction efforts while halting the gentrification of our communities. We must help bring residents back into our towns and encourage Virgin Islanders in our diaspora to return and contribute. Yet this is nearly impossible under our current healthcare capabilities, limitations, and critical status.

As for funding sources, there is our infamous internet gaming law, which the territory has chosen not to implement (not even to help the GERS), despite being the first to enact such legislation in the nation. This year marks 30 years of lost funding, largely due to a lack of understanding of the technology and how it could have been implemented using existing systems with the necessary safeguards to comply with federal laws at the time. This law also needs revision because the Internet is now everywhere, and there is no longer a need for service providers. The territory still has unique advantages that have never been fully explored. But now we are 30 years late in entering a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry. Truly shameful, and we want to self-govern. What an example to set?

The second possible funding source is sports betting—and again, we are late in entering another multi-billion-dollar industry. I believe we have already lost many millions of dollars due to our own neglect, and continue to do so as others around us seize the opportunity.

There is more than ample evidence to support the restoration and preservation of our towns; the big question is, is there the willingness and the actions to support such tasks? Outsiders clearly see the value in doing so, and are putting their money where we all can see. Why do those in charge not see or appreciate it? Locals need help in probate, which is a major hurdle for many; the second obstacle is families being able to reach an amicable consensus on their property.

Before concluding, let me show four slides that really show how well we are doing and they speak loudly.

[Slide 28], [Slide29], [Slide 30] [Slide31]

Thank you for allowing me to clearly and emphatically state my feelings on St Croix and the urgent need to preserve its legacy. I sure hope that from the testimony offered by persons today, by some slim chance, something gets translated into an actionable outcome. I'll stand by ready to respond to any questions you may have.