

Good morning, 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. My ancestor came from Denmark in 1734 and served as a clerk on the king’s plantation at Estate Bethlehem. My other ancestors came from England, West Africa, and Spain. I was a VI educator for 36 years and even taught some of the members who have sat and some that are currently sitting in this body, as well as many other retired individuals. I still remember well when my father told my brother and me how much the island had changed in his lifetime; at the time, we had no real comprehension of what he meant. Now, having seen how much St. Croix has changed in my own lifetime, over 80 years, I can relate very well to his words. I also 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 will also disappear.

It was not until I had retired from the Department of Education that I began researching who I am and my interest was piqued more so by my father’s own words and how he spoke of the beauty of St. Croix, the character of the people, and how generous and respectful they were with one another even though they didn’t 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 to learn. I remember some of those interactions between my father and those individuals, and I 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 became more obsessed and determined to find out as much as I could about what St. Croix was like during my father’s time and before. It is something I have pursued doggedly for the last twelve years. I am amazed at what I have found and the vast volumes of information housed in archives in Europe and the significant amount held within universities, museums, and national archives across the country. Over the years, I have amassed thousands of photographs and hundreds of documents. There is a wealth of material available on St. Thomas, but I have chosen only to focus on St. Croix, my home island, which I have far from completed. It is almost daily that I come across something of interest related to the territory’s history. The art of finding is in how one phrases the query used in your search. One misplaced word could override the relevance of the search.

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 have 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, and each is unique in its own right. Hurricane Hugo clearly highlighted many characteristics that should be emulated, as well as those that should never be repeated. I think Irma and Maria reinforced those issues. But human neglect has been the biggest culprit. Thus, in a sense, our architectural legacy should be regarded as a Crucian cultural characteristic. It should not be lost. Just off-the-cuff, we no longer even want to cook or eat what were considered our traditional foods. We are too good for that. Those were the foods our ancestors grew up on because it was what they could afford, what they were given, or what they could make do on. We should not hide or try to whitewash that out of our history either. Our Crucianism must be truthful and authentic.

Another blatant mistake because of not truly knowing our history is Bill # 4705, 1970. Although well intended in creating the symbol of office that the Governor wears. Five of the eight discs show incorrect flags; additionally, Germany never held any sovereignty over any of the islands.

[slide 1] Even the Department of Tourism was using the wrong flags in their media.

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 material 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. A private group of natives and adopted Crucians and residents is trying to preserve an important part of our own history and culture, which our own government has seriously neglected to do, but has to be done by the private sector. Just look at Whim, our historic museum, a perfect example of our inability to self-govern and secure our history. Our government is in shambles, and Estate Whim epitomizes that fact very clearly. This body also must share some of the blame. Priorities. Who can or will fix it? Let's see who can man-up? Ah, but we are producing a video biography which is neither cultural, or historic, just food for an ego.

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.

If this Committee, this Senate, or members of the viewing audience wish to understand the true historical character of Christiansted, I have spent thousands of hours researching and assembling a three-hour PowerPoint presentation using 400 of the more than 1,000 historical images I have gathered internationally—from 1700s etchings and sketches to 1800s photographs and more—illustrating what a walk down King, Hospital, and Fisher Streets, out to Fort Louise Augusta, once looked like. It captures the engineering aesthetic of the time. It is a pictorial history that does not lie; it is extremely factual, and it clearly shows what we had, and it clearly illuminates how we altered or eliminated it—often not in our best interest—to preserve or repair authentic historical infrastructure. An abridged version with less than 200 photos can be seen on YouTube.

Clearly visible in these photographs is no sign of potholes, even though the roads were not paved, but rather how extensively the street drainage has been altered, now causing frequent flooding of streets and structures. They also show how the streets have been elevated, in some cases by more than two feet, impacting building foundations and yard drainage. 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. 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 legacy that should and must be preserved. Where did all the cannons that highlighted our intersections go? Each intersection 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 crisis status.

As for funding sources, there is the internet gaming law, which the territory has chosen not to implement (not even to help the GERS), even though we were 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. The federal government used fear tactics to allow states to implement it first in the nation. 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 roadblock for many; the second obstacle is families being able to reach an amicable consensus on their property.

This concludes my statement, and thank you for allowing me to clearly and emphatically state my feelings on St Croix and the urgent need to preserve its legacy. If this committee will indulge me so that I can show you a few slides that highlight some interesting features of our towns. I'll stand by ready to respond to any questions you may have.