

The Virgin Islands Architecture Center for Built Heritage and Crafts, Inc.
1236 Strand Street, Christiansted, St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, 00820
www.viacctx.com – info@viacctx.com – 340-713-8424



Good morning and thank you Chairwoman James for your invitation to provide testimony to the Virgin Islands Legislature's Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure & Planning Committee. It is an honor to appear before this committee, its Members and all other Senators participating today to discuss *"Heirs Property, Prolonged Probate and Vacant and Abandoned Historic Properties in the U.S. Virgin Islands."* Thank you for inviting us to speak about the mission of the Virgin Islands Architecture Center for Built Heritage and Crafts or VIAC as we are known, the work we are currently doing, and how VIAC is an important part of the solution to the challenges outlined for this hearing. We hope to share a few ideas on how the issues of heirs' property, prolonged probate and vacant and abandoned properties can be addressed.

I am Mary Dema, Board Chair of VIAC, a Virgin Islands non-profit, 501(c)3 community development organization that was created to rehabilitate the Old Barracks property on Hospital Street, Christiansted, St. Croix into an historic preservation educational center that will teach, train and certify Virgin Islands young people in the building arts of stone, wood, iron and other crafts prevalent in the U. S. Virgin Islands and other historic U.S. and Caribbean towns. VIAC's mission is to train young people to own and operate businesses and services connected to these crafts and create a viable local workforce with the skills to rebuild and rehabilitate the aging towns in the Virgin Islands. Board members with me here today are Board Vice-Chair Donna Christensen, Bobby Schuster, and Chenzira Kahina. Board members not here today include Bo Manderup-Jensen, Christiana Williams, Jerri Farrante, Lee Rohn, and Jed JohnHope. Also

present today are our staff, Operations Manager Amanda Sackey, Construction Project Manager Xavier Acevedo, Grant and Public Relations Manager Monique Clendinen Watson and Administrative Assistant Kemora Harris.

So, what is VIAC's role in the pressing issue of "*Heirs Property, Prolonged Probate and Vacant and Abandoned Historic Properties in the Virgin Islands*?" Our role is rehabilitation, education and public awareness and advocacy. VIAC is conducting its own rehabilitation project at the Old Barracks and plans to work with other non-profits and family owners to restore their properties. VIAC is educating current high school and college students about Virgin Islands built heritage and has plans to train the future architects and trades men and women needed for the rehabilitation of our historic towns. VIAC is raising public awareness about the importance of our historic structures as places that hold the stories of our past while at the same time the promise of our future. VIAC is advocating for policies that will result in the revitalization of our historic towns and neighborhoods in a manner that benefits the community.

How is VIAC engaged in rehabilitation? VIAC has begun Phase One rehabilitation of the Old Barracks Property which includes the Emergency Stabilization of the Hospital Street staircase, the Shell Construction of Building 2 (the Old Labor Building) and the Stabilization of Building 1 (the Old Police Station).

How is VIAC engaged in education and building public awareness? Since 2024, VIAC has provided educational programming through high school summer programs, college internships and support to history and social studies classrooms that want to learn more about Virgin Islands built heritage. We have built a state-of-the-art classroom at our offsite location in Watergut and have completed two cohorts of the summer program, with 20 high school students from across the territory with lessons on historic and environmental preservation, drafting and

architecture, skilled trades, financial literacy and social emotional wellbeing. We have also completed three cohorts of college internships where we have placed UVI students in internships at the State Historic Preservation Office and the Division of Libraries and Museums where they obtained hands on experience of working in the preservation economy. At VIAC, our north star is the development of a two-year college program that teaches Virgin Islands architecture, building trades and cultural heritage tourism. To achieve this, VIAC has begun a relationship with the University of Notre Dame's School of Architecture's Duda Center for Preservation, Resilience and Sustainability with whom we hope to soon offer training in historic preservation techniques for local architects, tradesmen and trades helpers. We also have relationships with the American College of Building Arts in Charleston and the School of Architecture in Aarhus, Denmark with which we also hope to offer training opportunities. Through funding from the Mellon Foundation and the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, we have begun several projects to develop a visitor center at the Old Barracks Property that will create a space where the built heritage of our towns is archived, interpreted and told for those of us who love and live in the Virgin Islands, those of us who are Virgin Islands connected but live elsewhere and for visitors interested in the authentic history and culture of the island and its people. We have begun to refocus the St. Croix community on the importance of built heritage and the not to be forgotten stories and history that the towns hold. We have provided opportunities for the community to interact with the work being done in the towns by organizations and individuals that highlight the importance of rehabilitating old structures and telling the stories of the people who built and lived there throughout the centuries. We have highlighted the work of our historians and curators and the work they have done to preserve the Virgin Islands narrative. We

are currently conducting a survey on this project, and we urge everyone to visit our website at www.viacstx.com and take the survey.

VIAC is here today to advocate for the creation of a cohesive organizational structure that supports historic preservation and the revitalization of Christiansted and other historic Virgin Islands towns that is recognized and supported across all branches and agencies of government and that has the buy-in and support of the community. In 2013, the Virgin Islands Economic Development Authority (VIEDA) conducted charettes on a Christiansted Town Plan and the late Gerville Larsen, our visionary architect, artist and historic preservationist's idea of renovating the Old Barracks Property into an educational institute that taught the building trades and architecture was chosen as the desired plan. VIAC was created in 2018 as a vehicle to realize this vision. But VIAC is aware that this plan has only been adopted by VIEDA and is not being implemented or administered across all agencies of the Virgin Islands Government.

Gerville Larsen's vision was approved as the Christiansted Community Plan on March 10, 2016, and is part of the VIEDA Enterprise Zone Plan for Christiansted. The plan describes Christiansted as The College Town and describes economic activity eligible for tax exemptions as: Infill Housing/Artisan Live Work, Museums and Art Galleries/Greenbelt Businesses and Cultural Businesses. If you download the USVIEDA application for benefits on their website, you will see that if you want to invest in Christiansted and apply for benefits, you are asked to check one of these categories to become eligible. While VIEDA is fulfilling its part of the Christiansted Town Plan, by offering incentives to developers, we ask how is the rest of the Government of the Virgin Islands fulfilling the mission, because clearly if the true vision is to take shape, there will need to be buy in from all agencies of government and support for non-profits such as VIAC, CHANT, St. Croix Foundation and others doing this work with the people

of the Virgin Islands in mind. The non-profits don't need tax incentives, but they need investment to do the work. VIAC has demonstrated its capacity to take seed money, multiply it and make significant moves to make this vision of Christiansted a reality. The blueprint for preservation planning, funding, rehabilitation, culturally sensitive design and community engagement, funding models, public-private partnerships and policy reforms are all included in Gerville Larsen's town plan. The question is how does the Government of the Virgin Islands implement and administer the plan? How is it funded? What are the mechanisms that ensure it is adhered to? I have submitted his proposal for the record to the committee so that you can understand the comprehensive nature of his vision for how Christiansted should be developed. We all should familiarize ourselves with it. In this plan he addresses Residential and Hotel Development, Commercial Development, Historic Preservation & Public Education, Infrastructure, Parking, Sedimentation and Erosion Control, Public Safety, Noise Pollution, Homelessness, Contemporary Architecture and Historic Preservation, Economic Development Funding and Development Anchors.

With a government-wide plan for the towns that have the buy-in from the community the following can be assigned to the appropriate agencies or contracted to non-profits that can do the work.

- **On Heirs Property** – Non-profits should be funded to conduct workshops on how to navigate the court system and avoid the pitfalls of prolonged probate. A preservation registry of properties should be created, and funding should be directed to owners at different stages of development. Legal assistance teams should be created to assist property owners and models of how other communities like New Orleans, and Charleston, that have similar issues are moving to resolve

them. There should be collaboration with entities such as The Center for Heirs Property Preservation in South Carolina to assist property owners in obtaining clear title and addressing other issues.

- **On Prolonged Probate** – We have learned that on St. Croix there is only ONE Magistrate on St. Croix who handles probate issues with a docket also filled with traffic offenses, misdemeanor criminal matters, probable cause hearings, bail, warrants, domestic violence protective orders, small claims, landlord-tenant eviction proceedings, and many other functions. There is a need for an office or division that handles only probate matters.
- **On Abandoned and Vacant Properties** – We understand that a percentage of casino funds have been set aside to rehabilitate properties in Christiansted and Frederiksted through VIEDA. We hope that mini-grants can be provided for architectural assessments, roof repair, landscape clean up, cistern inspection, and board-up and secure. The Government of the Virgin Islands should also inventory the properties that it owns and support a rehabilitation schedule for each one, which in addition to revitalizing the towns could provide additional sources of income for other rehabilitation projects.
- **Support for the work of government agencies already doing the work** – With town plans that are supported across the government, there should be more coordination with agencies such as the State Historic Preservation, the Historic Preservation Commission, Public Works, Planning and Natural Resources, WAPA, Fire and Health to ensure that they are fully funded and staffed to implement the functions that they have jurisdiction over.

These are some of the ways that VIAC believes that the issues concerning our historic towns can be addressed. The towns need our investment and our attention. Like many other areas in Virgin Islands life, our towns are suffering under the weight of old systems created for another era. The late Gerville Larsen's Town Plan is a blueprint that supports the rehabilitation of generational family properties for the use of those families as starter homes for young families or income producing residential or business rentals. In the epilogue of the Christiansted Town Plan he wrote:

"Any town planning success is defined by the involvement of the citizens it will affect...Citizens cannot expect government to be the only driving force to effect changes...but the government can be the spark to get things going, the citizens are the fuel to create the fire of change and make it happen. Our community must buy into the goals of a formalized town plan and become full stakeholder participants in making it a reality."

With the support of his family, VIAC will honor Gerville Larsen's legacy by naming the rehabilitated Building One of the Old Barracks property in his honor – as the Gerville R. Larsen Cultural Heritage and Legacy Center. Through the Mellon Foundation's planning grant, he spent many hours over the past two years meeting and planning to bring this part of the VIAC plan into reality. VIAC hopes that this Committee, the Legislature and the entire government will honor him by adopting his vision of creating viable town plans that are implemented and supported to create a better life for all in the Virgin Islands. Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

