



GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS OF THE UNITED STATES

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DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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Office of the Commissioner

May 23, 2025

Senator Marise C. James, Esq.
Chair, Committee on Disaster Recovery
Infrastructure and Planning
36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands

RE: DEPARTMENT UPDATE ON THE COMPREHENSIVE LAND & WATER USE PLAN

Good day Senator James, Chair of the 36th Legislature's Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure and Planning, other committee members, non-committee members and legislative staff present, and members of the viewing and listening public, my name is Jean-Pierre L. Oriol, Commissioner for the Department of Planning & Natural Resources (DPNR), and I have with me Mrs. Leia LaPlace-Matthew, Territorial Planner. We are present today to provide an update on the Comprehensive Land and Use Plan (Comp Plan) as requested by the Chair's invitation dated May 8, 2025. This update will include:

- Progress made to date
- Current or anticipated challenges
- Any projected timelines for next steps in the implementation process

As you all know, the Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan was adopted just five months ago in December 2024, and once again I would like to thank all of the members of the 35th Legislature for their support; in particular, I would like to thank former Senator Donna Frett-Gregory and her team for their efforts in drafting the bill, as well as former Senate President Novelle Francis for allowing the legislation to the floor in the last session of the 35th Legislature, paving the way for its adoption. In these last five months since the adoption of the plan, our two main focuses have been on implementation and seeking funding for the implementation.

Focusing on implementation, DPNR, with the support of our consultant, built out an implementation matrix identifying internal (DPNR) priority actions, as well as identifying necessary responsibilities from external partners such as DPW, the EDA, WMA, VIHA and VIHFA. One fortunate outcome on the timing of the Comp Plan adoption is that we are able to share some of our outcomes for DPW with their consultants for the 2050 Comprehensive Transportation Master Plan, and members from our staff are part of the Executive Committee for this initiative. We are also in receipt of the three-year plan for the VIHFA and will be working with their team on the synergies with the Comp Plan for the housing focus. We will continue to work with external agencies on aligning their priorities with the Comp Plan and moving forward with synergy.

With respect to our internal focuses, DPNR is currently in the process of finalizing a contract for an external counsel to provide support to the Division of Comprehensive and Coastal Zone Planning (CCZP) for zoning code amendments, namely Title 29 Section 225 "Definitions,"

Section 228 “Table of Permitted Uses”, and Sections 235, 240 and 242 related to “Administration and Enforcement.” In addition, the Division of Coastal Zone Management is finalizing a contract for the updating of our Earth Change and CZM applications, executing a Memorandum of Agreement for geospatial support and expertise. And lastly, we have a number of habitat improvement projects through our Division of Fish and Wildlife, as well as a couple of large land purchases through our Division of Territorial Parks and Protected Areas, that we are working on for our conservation spaces.

As we are all aware, the funding provided by the Biden Administration is being retracted by the Trump Administration, and so our biggest challenge in implementing the Comp Plan, particularly the internal updates, will be funding. For example, the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) funding opportunity under FEMA has been ceased and the Big Beautiful Bill proposes a \$646M cut to FEMA Non-disaster grant programs. Many NOAA funded planning grants have also been cut, limiting our opportunities for federal resource support. My staff is in conversation with VIHFA, as they have monies in their CDBG-MIT program earmarked for planning projects. As the Territory’s planning agency, we are making our case for support from this program. This funding will go towards supporting the next major challenge, staffing, necessary to pursue implementation. Some work will be contractual, but key to our success will be additional staffing for project management that needs to take place for years to come.

The implementation of the Comp Plan is not only a multi-year initiative, but it is a multi-agency initiative. DPNR is currently pursuing our Year 1 projects identified in the implementation matrix, such as our Code updates, and we will be reaching out to external agencies throughout the summer. Funding and staffing will play a large role in the actual implementation, but the matrix sets a goal of 10 years for methodically achieving the goals of the plan.

This concludes my testimony on the current status of the Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan. Leia and I are here to answer any questions you may have to the best of our abilities.