



GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS OF THE UNITED STATES

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DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND NATURAL RESOURCES

4611 Tutu Park Mall
Suite 300, 2nd Floor
St. Thomas, VI 00802
(340) 774-3320

45 Mars Hill, Frederiksted
St. Croix, VI 00840
(340) 773-1082
dpnr.vi.gov



Office of the Commissioner

October 8, 2025

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

RE: TESTIMONY ON BILL NO. 36-0135 – EXPEDITED BUILDING PERMITS

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. Amanda Jackson-Acosta, Director of the Division of Permits. We are present today to provide comments on Bill No. 36-0195 – An Act amending Title 29 of the Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 5, Section 294 regarding the issuance of expedited building permits for developers.

On July 10, 2025, I sat before this Body and presented the proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2026 of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources. On Pages 25 and 26 of the Budget Testimony, I specifically pointed out that the FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program award that we transferred the majority of our Permits employees on to ease the burden on the General Fund was coming to an end in March 2026, and I requested that the Legislature approve a supplemental amount of ~\$600,000 to ensure that we did not have to terminate employees once the funding no longer remained. The Office of Management and Budget included this supplemental request during budget wrap up last month; however, when the final budget bill was submitted to the Governor for approval, no additional funding has been provided to extend the employment of the Permits staff, as well as hire additional staff to keep pace with the amount of activity now being submitted for review. Now DPNR is being told to implement a expedited review process when we run the risk of losing the majority of the staff tasked with responsibility for the review.

My specific comments on this Bill are that it is incomplete. The Sponsor states that there needs to be an expedited review process but then does not offer how many days this expedited process should take or what the fee should be for said process; rather, the Bill basically just says, DPNR you go figure it out. 29 VIC 294(b) requires the Department to make a determination on an application within 30 days receipt of said application. Would it be possible to make a determination in a shorter amount of time for a fee? Perhaps, provided we have sufficient staffing to do the reviews, particularly if the volume of those requests increases.

One concern that I do have with the Bill is that it requires the payment of the fee in full at submission of the application. We base fees on the estimated cost of construction, which is

verified by staff during the review process. If the applicant underestimates the cost of construction and the fee is said to be paid in full, then the applicant would not owe any additional funds upon receipt of the application. Should this legislation proceed, the Bill should reflect that the applicant is required to pay the plan review fee in full, as well as 75% of the permit fee, with the balance due upon receipt of the permit.

To RECAP:

There are no fee structures, such as percentage of costs or a cap.

There is no threshold for project size.

There is no timeline for expedited review process or final decision.

There is no effective date.

There is no funding designated for additional staff or resources.

Overall, DPNR is not opposed to creating a process by which an application can be reviewed expeditiously for a fee. It is just difficult to focus on this when we presently may lose the resources needed to perform our basic services.

This concludes my testimony on Bill No. 36-0135 – an Act providing for an expedited process for the issuance of building permits.