



GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS OF THE UNITED STATES

DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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April 10, 2026

Honorable Hubert L. Frederick
Chair
36th Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands
3022 Estate Golden Rock
Christiansted, Virgin Islands 00820

Re: Testimony on Sustainable Economic Development

Good day Honorable Hubert L. Frederick, members of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, non-committee members, legislative staff present, and members of the public, both viewing and listening. My name is Jean-Pierre L. Oriol, Commissioner of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR). Joining me is Ms. Leia LaPlace-Matthew, Territorial Planner. We appear before you today to provide testimony on how DPNR's core responsibilities, particularly zoning, land use, environmental review, and permitting, are directly impacting the efficient implementation of critical public projects and federally funded initiatives across the Territory.

DPNR recognizes the unprecedented opportunities that \$25 billion in anticipated federal funding and investment bring to the Territory, but we offer this testimony is within the narrower context of the Department's role. As the agency charged with land use regulation, zoning administration, permitting, and environmental review, DPNR plays a central role in ensuring that development proceeds in a manner that is lawful, efficient, transparent, and environmentally responsible.

The Department has identified systemic zoning compliance challenges, particularly affecting government-owned and publicly operated facilities, which in turn have delayed or complicated the implementation of both emergency repair projects and long-term capital improvements.

One of the most significant obstacles impacting project delivery is the fact that numerous existing government facilities are not in zoning compliance. This issue frequently arises during permit review for repair, renovation, or reconstruction projects, where facilities, often decades old, are discovered to be in zoning districts that do not permit the governmental use currently underway.

As a result, projects funded through federal recovery programs, territorial capital appropriations, and initiatives such as the Envision Tomorrow Program have faced avoidable delays due to the need for legislative rezonings, variances, or map amendments.

Between 2022 and 2026, the Legislature has been required to adopt multiple acts to rezone individual government properties simply to bring essential public facilities into zoning compliance. These have included rezonings for agencies such as:

- The Waste Management Authority
- The Department of Public Works
- VITEMA
- The Bureau of Corrections
- The Virgin Islands Public Broadcasting System and
- The Department of Health

Despite these corrective actions, additional government properties remain out of compliance, including public schools currently located within Agricultural (A-1) zoning districts, where schools are not a permitted use and social service and childcare facilities pending zoning corrections.

This piecemeal, project by project approach has proven to be inefficient, time consuming, and costly for both the Executive and Legislative branches.

To address these recurring challenges in a comprehensive manner, the Department recommends consideration of legislation that would:

1. Clarify the Zoning Classification of Government owned Property

All real property owned by the Government of the Virgin Islands should be zoned P-Public, regardless of any prior zoning designation shown on the official zoning maps, consistent with Section 229(q) of the Zoning Code.

An Act to clarify the zoning classification of government-owned property would immediately bring existing public facilities into zoning compliance and eliminate the need for repeated legislative rezonings for essential public projects.

2. Modernize Permitted Uses in the P-Public Zoning District

The Department further recommends amending Section 228 (Permitted Uses) by replacing the current, limited list of uses in the P-Public District with flexible, modern language providing that any use shall be permitted in the P-Public District if publicly owned and operated or publicly owned and privately operated under the continuous supervision of a public agency.

To ensure accountability and neighborhood compatibility, such uses would still require appropriate public notice, public hearings, and environmental review, preserving transparency and procedural fairness.

3. Address Zoning Map Errors Affecting Private Property

The Department recognizes that historical zoning map errors have resulted in some privately owned parcels being incorrectly designated as P-Public. For this reason, the Department recommends formal notification to affected property owners and an expedited zoning map amendment process, consistent with existing law, to correct such errors without unnecessary hardship.

With respect to permitting and inspection activities associated with federally funded construction:

DPNR is committed to ensuring that permitting does not become a bottleneck to project delivery. To that end, the Department supports the strategic use of qualified third-party plan review services, particularly during periods of high application volume. Under this approach:

- Applicants would cover the upfront cost of review.
- Certified third-party reviewers would supplement internal staff capacity.
- Environmental and safety standards would remain fully enforceable.

This approach expedites reviews while maintaining appropriate regulatory oversight.

Notwithstanding these efforts, the Department continues to face operational and logistical challenges, including limited access to vehicles and inspection equipment, procurement delays for basic operational necessities, and staffing shortages in critical technical divisions. That said, DPNR is actively working to expand staffing levels, and we anticipate that additional personnel will meaningfully improve review timelines and field inspection capacity.

In closing, the Department respectfully submits that clarifying the zoning status of government owned property and modernizing the P-Public zoning framework will:

- Remove unnecessary delays to public infrastructure projects
- Improve coordination across agencies
- Protect environmental and community interests
- Support the timely expenditure of federal recovery funds
- Reduce administrative burdens on both the Legislature and DPNR

The Department stands ready to work collaboratively with this Honorable Legislature to develop and implement these reforms. We appreciate the opportunity to testify and remain available for further discussion or technical assistance.