



JUNE 9, 2025

COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND AGRICULTURE

Senate Hearing Testimony

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THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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June 4, 2025

Honorable Senator Hubert L. Frederick
Chairman, Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture
36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Frits E. Lawaetz Legislative Conference Room
#3022 Estate Golden Rock
St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands 00820

Dear Honorable Senator Frederick,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this joint testimony before the 36th Legislature's Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture regarding the Virgin Islands Department of Education's (VIDE) proposal to relocate the warehouse for the St. Thomas/St. John District. We support transferring the facility from the site of the former Addelita Cancryn Junior High School to VIDE-owned property at the former Island Block location.

Enclosed with this letter is a handbook containing our testimony. We appreciate your continued support and attention to the progress and plans aimed at rebuilding a stronger, more resilient Department of Education.

Sincerely,

Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Ed.D.
Commissioner

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STATEMENT BY COMMISSIONER

Good morning, Chair of the Economic Development and Agriculture Committee, Senator Hubert L. Frederick; Vice-Chair, Senator-at-Large Angel L. Bolques, Jr.; committee members Senators Marvin A. Blyden, Alma Francis Heyliger, Marise C. James, Franklin D. Johnson, and Clifford A. Joseph; non-committee members present; and all those listening and viewing today:

My name is Chaneel Callwood, and I am here representing Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Commissioner of Education. It is an honor to provide this joint testimony as we share updates on the disaster recovery project at Island Block home to the future Virgin Islands Department of Education Administration Center. This site will be a cornerstone of our efforts to rebuild and reimagine public education in the territory.

We also thank you for the opportunity to discuss the design and construction of the new VIDE Warehouse, a project in partnership with the Virgin Islands Port Authority. This facility holds great potential to positively impact our students, faculty, and staff by supporting the logistical needs of the department.

I want to take a moment to commend this committee for its steadfast support and ongoing partnership. Your responsiveness and collaboration have been critical as we pursue our mission to Reform, Rebrand, and Rebuild public education across the Virgin Islands.

Since 2017, we have been on a shared journey to restore and strengthen our educational infrastructure. I am pleased to report that approximately \$3.4 billion in funding has been secured through FEMA, \$3.3 billion through the Public Assistance program for permanent work and \$100 million through the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program for the development of Saferooms.

Today, I will focus on the warehousing initiative for the Department of Education on St. Thomas. Education is the foundation of our society as it shapes the future of our workforce, economy, and civic life. Therefore, it is essential that we ensure sufficient investment in the systems and facilities that support our students and educators.

Joining me this morning, Lisa Alejandro, Commissioner of Department of Property and Procurement and Mr. Craig Benjamin, Director of the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance.

Thank you again for your continued commitment and for allowing me the opportunity to share this testimony today.

ADMINISTRATION CENTERS IN BOTH DISTRICTS

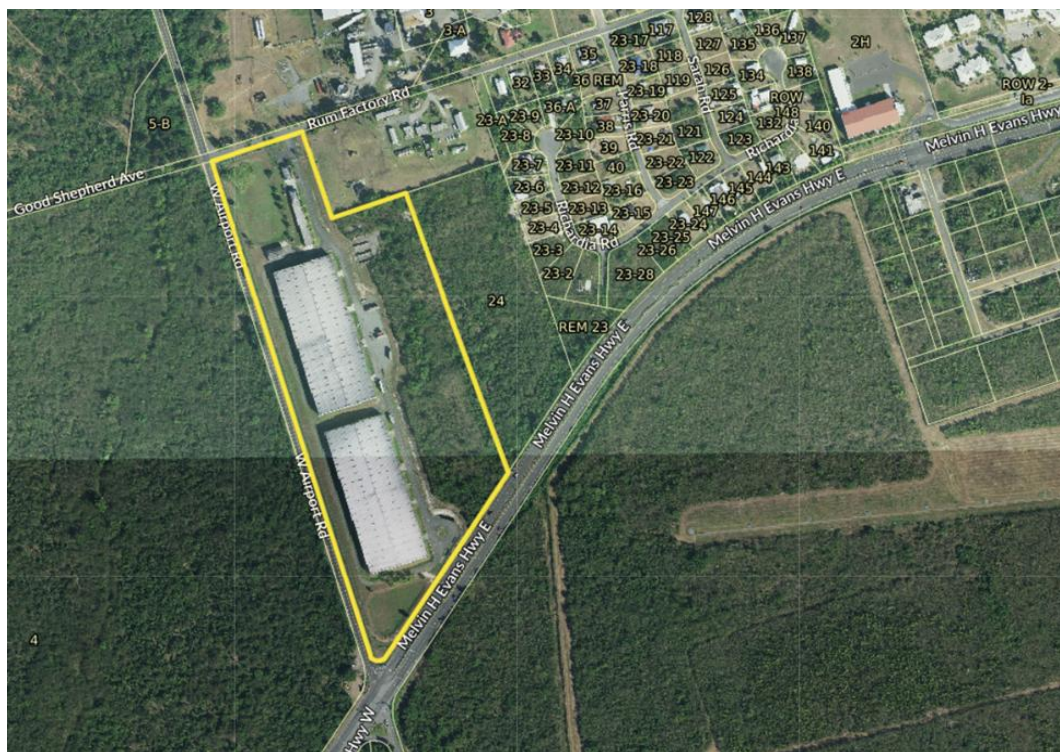
The Department obtained FEMA approval and utilized FEMA funds to acquire properties in both districts for the development of new Administration Centers. Each Administration

Center will serve as a centralized hub, consolidating all VIDE offices and warehouses within the respective district.

On St. Thomas, the property formerly known as Island Block was acquired to construct an Administration Center that will house both district and state offices, along with associated warehouse facilities. Similarly, on St. Croix, the property previously known as the Diageo Warehouse was purchased for the development of an Administration Center designed to support district and state operations, including warehouse space.

STX Administration Center Update

St. Croix Education Administration Center at the former Diageo Site is included in the St. Croix Bundle that is currently out for bid.



accommodate both district and state administrative offices as well as a warehouse, VIDE now can develop a comprehensive, centralized “one-stop shop” for its operations. This also creates an opportunity for VIPA to utilize the full Cancryn site exclusively for port-related purposes.

The St. Thomas Bundle includes the design and construction of the new St. Thomas Education Administration Center. Design programming is underway and includes planning for both district and state offices, with dedicated space allocated for the future design and construction of the warehouse.



Constructing the warehouse at Island Block represents the most efficient path forward to meeting the immediate needs of the Virgin Islands Department of Education.

COST EFFICIENCY AND LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

From a technical and financial standpoint, the Island Block/Red Cross warehouse is part of the site to construct a new facility. The new building should be steel frame on a floating slab, or such foundation required by geotechnical reports. The remaining footprint after the demolition of the Island Block/Red Cross warehouse is smaller than the 35,000 sq. Ft. originally anticipated at the former Cancryn site as outlined in Act #8512. Therefore, a mezzanine of approximately ½ footprint will be required to support specific and office spaces for the warehouse management and staff to attain the 35,000 square feet minimum required by the Act to meet the original legislative intent of Act #8512, as signed into law

by the Governor. In addition, the newly constructed building must be built according to the new building codes.

LEGAL AND POLICY CONCERNS

The property description cited in Bill No. 36-0065- Parcel No. 1B and 47B-1 Gasverks Gade No.3 Crown Prince Quarter, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands is incorrect. The correct address is Parcel No. 1B and 47B-1 Kronprindsens Gade, Kronprindsens Quarter, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. Section 2(b) of Act 8512, which guaranteed that not less than 50% of income from commercial use of the former Addelita Cancryn Junior High School campus would be remitted to the VIDEW Maintenance Fund, has been eliminated entirely from Bill 36-0065. Under Act 8512, Section #2(b): After 15 years, the Port Authority would be required to renegotiate the percentage of income driven from commercial use of the Cancryn Campus to be remitted to the VIDE Maintenance Fund; however, the amount remitted must never be less than 50% of income by use of the property. Section #2(b) was eliminated in its entirety under Bill #36-0065. We assume that it was an oversight because this critical funding stream is intended to support the long-term maintenance efforts of the department. The removal of this jeopardizes the future fiscal sustainability for VIDE infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I respectfully urge this committee to continue prioritizing education funding in its deliberations. We fully support the proposed amendment except for the minor edits to insert the word “new construction” after retrofit and to correct the property address t that would be needed to protect the interest of VIDE. This bill enables the Virgin Islands Port Authority to construct the much-needed warehouse at the Island Block site. This amendment will expedite the project timeline and allow for earlier occupancy, helping to meet critical operational needs. With timely collaboration among all stakeholders, we are confident this project can become a reality in the near future.

We also appreciate this body’s continued alignment with the Department’s priorities, particularly in affirming that (1) the Port Authority will make payments to the Education Maintenance Fund, and (2) the total square footage of the warehouse shall not be less than 35,000 square feet. Thank you for your attention to this critical matter. We are prepared to answer any questions and provide further information or clarification as needed.