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Delegate Plaskett's Vision: A Resilient and Prosperous Future for the Virgin Islands

Massive Federal Investment to Revolutionize Territory's Critical Infrastructure

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In the last few months, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has announced monumental awards for rebuilding critical infrastructure in the Virgin Islands related to destruction from Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. The announcement of over \$928 million for the rebuild of Roy L Schneider Regional Hospital, along with the previously announced \$834 million for the Juan F. Luis Hospital create a tremendous opportunity to become a regional powerhouse for health care. The rebuild awards of \$530 million for Charlotte Amalie High School, \$247 million for Central High School and \$133 million for the Julius Sprauve School, present the ability for unique educational vision for our children's future. Additionally, President Biden's recent agreement to the adjustment of the federal match for two categories of rebuilding

make the financial feasibility to the territory that much more real. With the allocation of an estimated near \$12 to \$15 billion coming to a population of less than 100 thousand people – we cannot squander or be cavalier about this profoundly transformational opportunity.

In October of 2017, I wrote a letter to then Governor Kenneth Mapp and shared the following: “We have in this moment both an opportunity and a responsibility to ensure that the greatest good emerges from this calamity to our Virgin Islands. This is an opportunity to not just rebuild, but to create an exponentially better Virgin Islands; advancing technologies, mitigating energy issues and creating resilience in our critical infrastructure.”

In that same letter, I expressed the urgent need to request federal funding for our territory to be made whole—an exponentially larger amount from what we would need to just repair damages from the 2017 hurricanes; not to rebuild as things were at the time of the storm but to rebuild in a manner that brings our public infrastructure to how it should be – resilient, energy efficient, hardened. In my follow up letter on December 5th of that same year, I specifically requested that Governor Mapp make a written request to waive how the Stafford Act would treat our rebuild. Removing the limitation of pre-disaster condition and causation was seen as far-fetched, and many will recall that I was publicly rebuked. Nevertheless, without a vision the people perish, and I was undeterred and believed big for our home.

My office made the convincing argument that the level of disaster in the Virgin Islands was exacerbated by the lack of federal funding investment in our critical infrastructure prior to the storms, which made the effect of the hurricanes more profound.

The changes in law I was able to obtain under the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 allow FEMA, for the duration of the recovery from Hurricanes Irma and Maria in the Virgin Islands, to rebuild critical infrastructure with resilient design and features, up to the latest industry building standards and notwithstanding pre-disaster conditions in the Virgin Islands (the standard that normally applies). This standard was markedly different than the standard for the mainland. I then worked with the Bryan Administration to ensure that FEMA utilized the prudent replacement standard. I brought in the drafters of the legislation to show FEMA the intent of the bill and pushed those in local government who would have been fine with the lower award as concern for the 10% match loomed in some individuals’ minds.

Until President Biden’s recent announcement of a partial match waiver, the Virgin Islands government would have been required to provide 10 percent of the grant in local matching funds for the billions of federal dollars for hurricane recovery projects—for our schools, hospitals, water, power, communications, and other critical infrastructure – almost \$1.5 Billion. President Biden’s declaration has cut that cost share requirement to just 2 percent for critical rebuilding projects approved before September 30, 2024, and completed over the next 2 years, and 5 percent otherwise. This will allow the Virgin Islands more federal financial assistance to push through the most critical projects so that the territory is given the best opportunity to see our hurricane recovery through to completion in a timely fashion.

Now is the time for all stakeholders in this journey to not just rebuild but commit to come together in the re-imagining and “future building” of our beloved Virgin Islands. I have proposed, and Governor Bryan has agreed to the idea that a summit be convened with government officials, federal and private sector partners, and the Biden administration, along with subject matter experts to discuss plans, with candidness on challenges and openness to innovation and best practices. Portions of this summit should engage the public – through surveys, inclusion of previous vision reports, charrettes and public town halls, as well as active participation. Academics, local

government agencies, our local legislature, federal partners, citizens working together in transparency, communication, innovation, and most of all good will; recognizing that not one sector has the answer, and we must respect one another and work together positively. Coming together to move forward this summer, before the 7th anniversary of the 2017 hurricanes would be extraordinary.

This is bigger than any one person, bigger than our opinions, politics, or personal desires – its about our islands, our collective prosperity, our future.

Congresswoman Stacey E. Plaskett represents the United States Virgin Islands' at-large Congressional District in the United States House of Representatives. She is currently serving her fifth term in Congress.

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