

logo not found or type unknown

# Bryan Vows to Fix WAPA, Start Teachers at Over \$50,000, and Lead USVI Into Era of Prosperity With \$800 Million in Yearly Construction Spending

Politics / **Published On January 24, 2023 06:17 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert and Elisha George **January 24, 2023**

Image not found or type unknown



**Governor Albert Bryan on Mon. Jan. 23, 2023 delivered his fifth State of the Territory Address — the first following his reelection — where he vowed to lift the Virgin Islands into a new era of prosperity. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE**

On Monday, for the fifth time, Governor Albert Bryan delivered his State of the Territory Address before the Legislature, telling Virgin Islanders that construction will lead the USVI's prosperous outlook with hundreds of millions of dollars in funding every year heading into the next decade. He further stated that changes were underway in critical areas such as housing, energy, crime-fighting, education, health and infrastructure which have remained underdeveloped through past administrations.

Mr. Bryan said his government was “ushering in a new era of prosperity in the Virgin Islands,” which involves the development of the territory’s cannabis industry, an area of production that the governor believes can create a major revenue stream to drive the economy.

“We understand the high-risk, high-reward nature of this business, and so we will be taking a cautious and conservative approach to building the regulatory ecosystem that will sustain the cannabis industry in the Virgin Islands,” he noted.

In the years ahead, Mr. Bryan said residents can also look forward to “a burgeoning construction sector.” He anticipates revenue of at least \$800 million in federal spending each year.

“Growth in the overall Gross Territorial Product by two percent is considered robust. This is an almost 20 percent increase in spending every year for the next four years. We expect that this influx of dollars will continue annually for at least the next 10 years,” he said.

In addition, he said the government has identified \$17 million in local funds to dredge the inner harbor in Charlotte Amalie. That project is currently going through the Army Corp of Engineers permitting process. Once completed, the harbor will be able to accommodate the largest cruise ships serving the Caribbean region and is expected to grow cruise tourism past the 777,000 passengers who visited in fiscal year 2022.

Increases in the number of hotel rooms via renovating old properties and constructing new resorts are also planned for the next five years.

Infrastructural upgrades will include water quality improvements and sewer line replacements, all propelled by the Water and Power Authority (WAPA).

The problems with WAPA itself also have to be addressed, the governor noted, as he committed to fixing the issues with the company in his second term and working to solve the energy crisis in the USVI.

“I am confident in setting this goal because I know there are tremendous resources being made available to help WAPA turn the corner on its problems and this administration has the courage and determination to see it through,” Mr. Bryan said.

To maintain an acceptable level of quality in healthcare in the territory, the government has allotted \$10 million each to the Juan F. Luis Hospital and the Schneider Regional Medical Center to support recruitment and retention of nursing and allied health professionals.

The governor’s commitment to improving healthcare includes the long-awaited opening of the JFL North modular facility on St. Croix, which he reiterated [will open during the first quarter of 2023](#). He also vowed to restore the Charlotte Kimelman Cancer Institute.

On the education front, this year the Bryan-Roach administration also intends to start construction, restoration, and repair projects on eight Head Start centers. According to Mr. Bryan, these projects will require an expenditure of over \$42 million to complete.

“Much like free college tuition, these are long-term investments whose impact may not be immediately obvious but will undoubtedly pay dividends for our community in the long run,” he insisted.

The governor also mentioned the [construction of the Arthur Richards PK-8 School in St. Croix](#) – a \$160 million project. In addition, the V.I. Department of Education (VIDE) will utilize \$138 million in American Rescue Plan allotments to reform, rebuild, and rebrand public education.

The implementation of site-based management will allow principals at each school to utilize \$250,000 to create specialized programs for their students.

The governor vowed to raise the starting pay of teachers, currently just above \$40,000, to \$50,000 annually. "It is downright ridiculous that our teachers are working second jobs to meet their needs instead of earning that money to enrich our children. We have the money; we will pay the teachers," he said.

On his efforts to combat crime, Mr. Bryan pointed to gains made even as he promised to do more. Officers, the governor said, will receive incentives. In the coming weeks the V.I. Police Department will offer a \$10,000 sign-on bonus for new police officers. The governor also said that his government planned to approach the Office of Gun Violence & Control to modify peace officer status for federal law enforcement officers.

"We also plan to approach this body to adopt a requirement for individuals to declare within 24 hours their intent to import firearms into the territory," he stated.

The Bureau of Corrections has launched its long-awaited Offender Re-Entry Program which is expected to reduce recidivism — the tendency for past criminals to re-offend — and re-integrate former inmates into society.

During his speech the governor also remarked on a 5.3 percent decline in the unemployment rate in September 2022, a trend he expects to continue this year. The governor also spoke of the work at the V.I. Port Authority and its executive director, Carlton Dowe, with several new projects ongoing in both districts and new contracts with cruise line partners leading to a massive influx of cruise ship guests to both districts. And he spoke of the airport modernization projects — expected to be completed by the time the governor leaves office — as yet another major undertaking that will lift the USVI's economic outlook in the coming years.

He said that it is a "positive sign" that already many businesses in the territory have had challenges finding employees.

Elsewhere, Mr. Bryan showed his focus on promoting activity in the USVI that Virgin Islanders can enjoy: from funding for cricket fields in both St. Croix and St. Thomas, to the return of drag racing on St. Croix, and an agreement after several years to develop the horse racing tracks in both districts.

Even with the optimistic outlook, Mr. Bryan warned of what he said were strong headwinds the USVI faces as it trods forward.

"Financial conditions are tightening across the globe and there is a widespread shortage of skilled workers, thereby creating issues for a variety of industries reliant on those skilled trade workers. Nationally, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is predicting at least a mild recession to affect the country sometime later this year caused by falling consumer and business spending and rising interest rates. But we do not need economists to tell us what we feel at the gas pump and in the grocery store.

"Since the beginning of 2020, inflation has increased markedly in the Territory, increasing 7.1 percent in 2020, by 5.7 percent in 2021, and by approximately 7.0 percent in 2022," the governor said.

He pointed to reason for hope as the Federal Reserve has decided to raise interest rates at a milder pace, as inflation in the U.S. continues on a downward trend, currently at 6.1 percent from a 40-year high of 9.1 percent. "Hopefully, we will soon see the benefit of that locally," he said.

"We cannot predict with certainty what 2023 holds for the global economy, so we must continue to build our economic resilience for what is to come," Mr. Bryan said. "So, while we count our blessings, we must remain ever vigilant that hard times are inevitable, and we must be prepared."

© Viconsortium 2024