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Heated St. Croix Town Hall Surfaces Similar Concerns as St. Thomas: Dispossession Of Locals Under Derelict Building Plan

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Derelict building. By. GETTY IMAGES

On Wednesday night, it was St. Croix's turn to come together for a discussion on the administration's plan to deal with abandoned and derelict buildings in the territory. Governor Albert Bryan Jr. opened the discussion, as he did on [Monday in St. Thomas](#), with an optimistic view of the opportunity before the territory.

"This is a rare, rare occasion and time in the Virgin Islands. It's a time when we actually have the resources to do something about the derelict and abandoned buildings in our town," he declared.

Governor Bryan sought to pre-emptively defuse sentiments that the proposal put forward by his administration would result in Virgin Islanders losing their properties. Promising that the policy that is ultimately finalized would only apply to buildings considered “abandoned” – that is, uninhabited for at least five years – he declared, “there is nothing in this legislation that takes property away from people, not one.”

Like at the beginning of the week, Government House Chief of Staff Karl Knight walked the audience through the mechanics of the plan, outlining the three pathways through which a property could come under conservatorship. Before opening up to the floor for questions, he noted that some suggestions coming out of the St. Thomas meeting are already being considered for incorporation into the plan, including increasing the length of time an entity has to have been in operation to be considered as a conservator for a derelict building.

Although Mr. Knight did also note the government’s intention to do its part in cleaning up the blight in the towns across the USVI by addressing its own stock of abandoned and derelict buildings, the first two comments coming from residents highlighted the several substantial buildings owned by the territory that were negatively impacting on the communities in which they stood. Governor Bryan noted that the government was trying to attract interest in a building on Strand Street in Frederiksted from tourism investors. Apart from just rehabilitating derelict government-owned properties, Mr. Bryan noted that Frederiksted in particular had over \$250 million worth of development projects slated for the next five years.

A tense moment between St. Croix resident Karen Dickinson and Governor Bryan occurred when Ms. Dickinson concluded her commentary about the necessity of ensuring residents receive sufficient legal support during the conservatorship process with an accusation that the executive branch was focusing on the wrong priorities. “The whole community is suffering while you’re enriching yourselves,” she declared. “Let us be fair with what’s going on in this territory. It’s not derelict buildings, it’s hunger. It’s unemployment. It’s economic development,” she asserted, after voicing suspicions that the plan was a subterfuge to dispossess Virgin Islanders of their property. In response, Governor Bryan called her an “example of how perfectly [not in touch] people are,” a characterization which the following commenter called “unbelievably disrespectful.”

That commenter also expressed his opinion that the proposal would not bring prosperity for Virgin Islanders, but opportunity for those who he termed “colonizers” to move in to secure a piece of the territory for themselves. “What you’re doing is clear gentrification,” the vocal young man declared.

Mr. Knight countered the assessment of the previous speakers. “What we are proposing is how do we support property owners before they get their properties taken away, before it goes to auction, before it falls into disrepair and cannot be rehabbed.” Saying that he wanted to place the government’s intentions clearly on the record to prevent the spread of misinformation, he refuted the idea that this plan would bring about gentrification, “because there is no change of ownership. Nobody is allowed to come in and take anything from us,” Mr. Knight declared. “We have gone to great pains to come up with a solution that works for us as a people and to avoid those situations.”

Responding to even more pushback from the audience, Mr. Knight reminded those present of his Crucian roots. He spoke of two family-owned properties that could fall under this program, using his relatives as examples of how Virgin Islanders would be able to benefit from the plan. “This is my community too. I would never propose anything or be party to anything that has a detriment to my community or my family, or the people who I have grown up [with] and been around all my life,” he said.

With emotions running high, the meeting was disrupted for some minutes by a man shouting off-camera and away from the microphone. After the attention of the attendees was turned back to the topic at hand, the question and answer session continued. Dr. Jessica Samuel returned to the topic of gentrification, noting that it is often an unintended consequence of development proposals. She asked what policies are being contemplated with regard to mitigating the impact of gentrification as these abandoned buildings are being rehabilitated with the concomitant increases in property values, and tax burden, both for the properties being renovated themselves as well as those surrounding them.

Governor Bryan took Dr. Samuel's comments as a recommendation to impose a property tax freeze in communities that have been targeted for redevelopment under this plan, for the duration of the development period. "That's a good recommendation to the legislation," he noted. He noted that developers' profit for their work would be capped by the courts, and that the properties under the plan cannot have liens placed on them. "So the owners are never in danger of losing their property through mortgage."

This suggestion, as well as others coming from the two public meetings this week, will be incorporated into the proposal. An updated draft will be circulated after the end of the week to those who provided email addresses at the town halls, as well as the wider public. As the meeting came to a close, Governor Bryan said that he understood why public anxiety over the proposal was high. "It's very scary. Like I said, it involves a lot of trust." However, it was something that needed to be addressed for the betterment of the Virgin Islands, he argued. Promising to incorporate the feedback and the recommended protections for residents into the proposal, Governor Bryan vowed to "try our best to produce a piece of legislation that we all can live with."