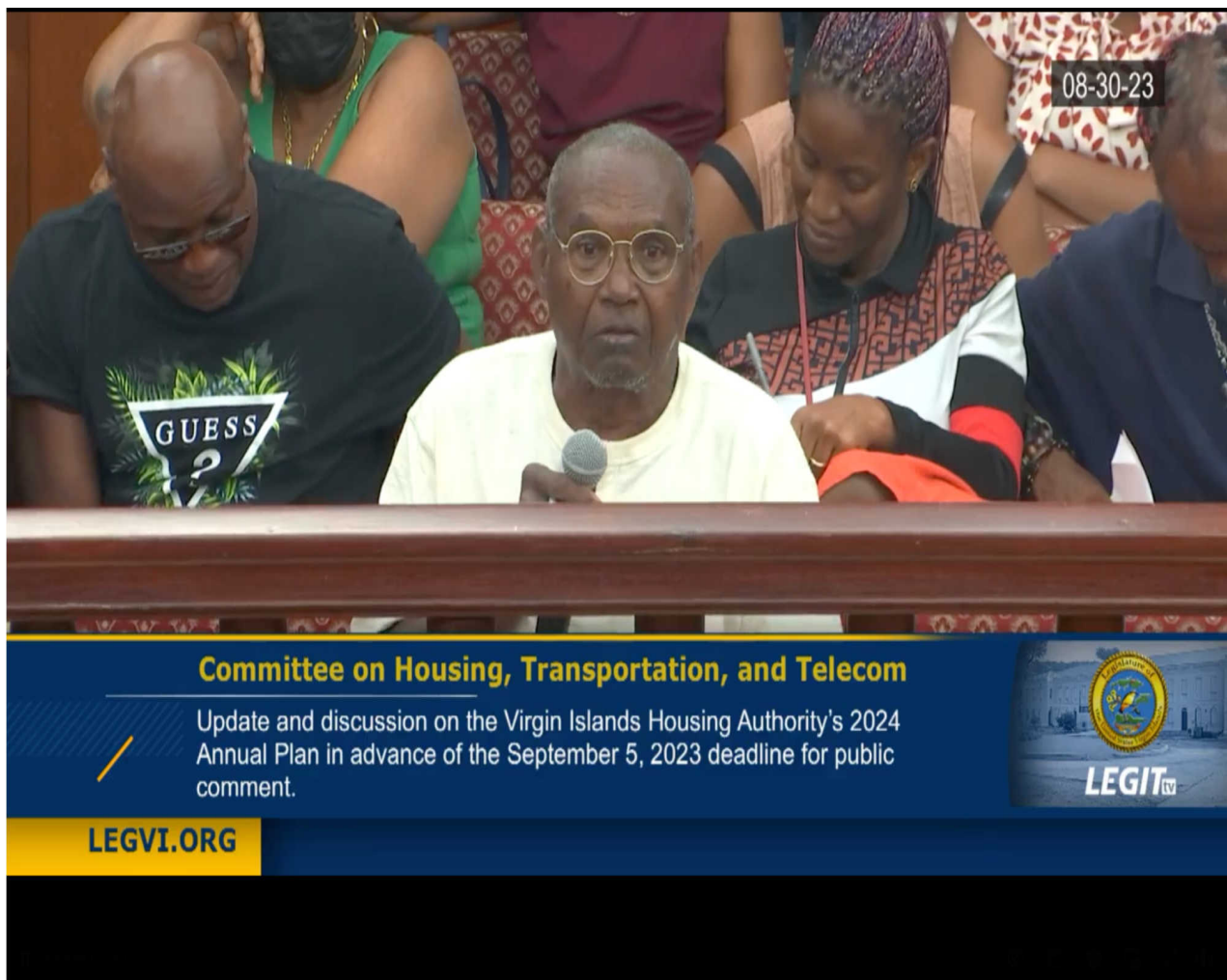


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Abandoned Vehicles, Unkept Lawn: St. Thomas Resident Accuses VIHA of Lease Violations at Town Hall Meeting

Senate / **Published On September 01, 2023 06:55 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **September 01, 2023**



Resident of Bergs Home in St. Thomas voices concerns during the Senate's tri-island town hall meeting on Wed. Aug. 30th, 2023. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

One resident of the Bergs Home public housing community on St. Thomas has accused both residents and landlords of breaking various agreements under the existing V.I. Housing Authority lease arrangement. Jeffrey Auguste addressed the Committee on Housing and VIHA during Wednesday's tri-island town hall meeting, providing photographic evidence to support his claims.

Mr. Auguste's gripes included the absence of landscaping work such as tree-trimming, cleaning drains and clearing guttering, as well as the apparent inability to keep the community's general surroundings clean. A major sore point for the Bergs Home resident is the number of "abandoned and inoperable vehicles" in the community. Calling the area a "dump," he explained that whenever efforts are made to clear out derelict vehicles, more of them simply reappear.

Praising some communities for their cleanliness and singling them out as exceptions from the norm, Mr. Auguste appealed for more to be done to ensure those responsible take up the mantle of maintaining the public housing developments. These sentiments sparked an impassioned response from Jimmy Farmer, VIHA's director of asset management.

Mr. Farmer vehemently denied that property managers do not care for the properties under their purview. He explained that they are well aware that vehicles "sitting on crates, sitting on cinder blocks [and] sitting on tires" is a health and safety hazard not just in Castle Burke, but in housing developments across St. Thomas and St. Croix. However, when directives are given to managers to tag these vehicles for removal, Mr. Farmer says, "They're accosted, they're cursed, they're threatened." As a result of the danger being faced by property managers, VIHA has had to engage officers from the V.I. Police Department when a tagging exercise is being conducted. "It shouldn't be like that," he lamented. "They're simply doing their job."

Another obstacle in the removal of derelict and abandoned vehicles is the lack of space to store them once taken out of the communities, Mr. Farmer explained. "I believe, as of this week, the St. Croix district is working with identifying space. But we're going to continuously stay on the St. Thomas administrator to help us as it relates to tagging and towing these vehicles to minimize some of that administrative burden on our staff," he said.

With regards to upkeep of the communities, Mr. Farmer disclosed that VIHA is currently facing approximately \$200 million worth of "maintenance deficiencies" between both districts, but only has a budget of \$50 million to address all the issues. Therefore, Farmer says the authority must first focus on "what's important" including leaks and health and safety hazards. VIHA is aware that some residents have decided to withhold rent payments until issues like those highlighted by Mr. Auguste are remedied. While he applauded their efforts at holding VIHA accountable, Farmer reminded residents that this must be done in "the right way," suggesting that withheld rent payments be placed within the court escrow system as opposed to "stick[ing] it under your mattress."