

The USVI Needs More People: Bryan Laments Chronic Worker Shortage Delaying Disaster Recovery Projects

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Full employment, as defined by the Brookings Institute, occurs when an economy cannot add any more jobs without risking unwelcome inflation. Elsewhere, it is described as a scenario where everyone who wants to work is already employed. Many economists define a society which has reached full, or maximum employment, as one where the jobless rate is around 5 percent or below.

Unemployment on St. Croix is 4 percent, and the number dips to 3.5 percent in the St. Thomas/St. John district, signaling an incredibly tight labor market. Employers are “scraping the bottom of the barrel” in the hunt for adequate staff to fill numerous vacancies, said Governor Albert Bryan Jr. at last Wednesday’s [town hall meeting](#) on St. Croix.

The lack of available workers has been a concern of the governor's for some time. Earlier this year, he had even hinted that an influx of [unauthorized immigrant workers](#) would be welcome, stating in an interview with the Consortium in January that he's not inclined to pay close scrutiny to the status of those who arrive in the territory looking for an opportunity to benefit from the construction boom.

Last Wednesday, Mr. Bryan tied the severe labor shortage to the slow pace of progress on several infrastructure projects. He lauded the several projects currently underway, particularly with regards to housing, but stressed that this is only a dent in the immense volume of work yet to be tackled. "We still have at least three or four more developments to do, and 200 hurricane repairs to do, and another 200 houses for St. Croix alone. We don't have the people to build these things. We need to find people."

The labor crunch has gotten so severe, the governor explained, that despite 20 more housing projects scheduled to go out to tender in the next three months, "people are not even bidding on stuff anymore...contractors are coming to office and telling us don't put out any more jobs."

Governor Bryan's comments came in response to a question from a participant at the town hall meeting, who wanted to know whether Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) or Disaster Mitigation (MIT) dollars would be able to be expended before the 2026 deadline, after which any unused funding would have to be returned.

The governor explained that the territory may have to seek a waiver to be able to keep the funds longer. He said the Office of Management and Budget had already noted that projects are not moving along quickly enough - ultimately due to the lack of labor.

A suggestion that additional investments be made in workforce development to increase the pool of skilled labor available to work was rebutted by Governor Bryan, who pointed out that \$10 million had already been dedicated to workforce development and free training in every trade. What the territory needs, Mr. Bryan said, is more people.