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Completed First Phase of Walter I.M Hodge Pavilion Renovations a 'Physical Manifestation' Of Goal To Transform Public Housing in Territory, VIHA Says

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The completed renovations on the first 82 units of the Walter IM Hodge Pavilion in Frederiksted, St. Croix on Oct. 5, 2023. By. GOV'T HOUSE

Having completed renovations on the first 82 units of the Walter IM Hodge Pavilion, beaming officials took the stage on Thursday at the ribbon cutting ceremony for phase one of the project.

“The sound of construction is music to my ears,” said Robert Graham, executive director of the V.I. Housing Authority. This first work being done on VIHA’s ambitious plan to completely rehabilitate the territory’s public housing stock is the “physical manifestation” of that goal, Mr. Graham told the audience. “Our plan has the potential to provide a clear path and a helping hand

for every household living in Hodge,” he declared, noting that the investors had joined with VIHA in supporting the “Right Path” resident services plan with funds from their equity. “Not HUD funds, not local funds, investor equity, with substantial annual funding.”

He urged the heads of households for the first 82 families included in the first phase to volunteer for the resident council and work to refine programs that would serve all 248 households that are ultimately expected to be accommodated by August 2024. Council elections will be held in January of next year, Mr. Graham said. “We want to have a line of folks to volunteer.”

James Benton, president of J Benton Construction, LLC, described the improvements made to the apartments. Aside from design upgrades to cabinets, countertops and appliances, the units have been fitted with new plumbing and electrical systems. Energy efficient lighting and fans have been installed, and public spaces will contain solar panels and emergency generators. Outdoor light poles will be solar powered, Mr. Benton noted. New facilities for residents include a senior center, playground for toddlers, and community gardening areas. Basketball courts and the community center will be revamped as well.

Mr. Benton disclosed that his team is deeply invested in this project. “Nine of our employees live in Walter Hodge, and six additional employees that work on this site live in other affordable housing communities,” he informed. “We know firsthand just how important doing this work and doing it safely, efficiently and timely is to all those who live, work and raise families here.”

He emphasized the enormity of the effort that this project entails, citing 20 companies providing front line support, and over 300 tradespeople who have worked a combined 250,000 hours to bring phase one to fruition.

“Housing is intrinsically connected to better health outcomes, economic mobility and employment prospects,” said Michael Lohr, a managing director in the Urban Investment Group of Goldman Sachs Asset Management. He noted that the investment group “immediately saw the impact that infrastructure, resilience and energy improvements could have on the resonance of Walter Hodge”, when first introduced to the project. Dayna Clendinen, interim executive director of the VI Housing Finance Authority, said that while it was difficult to forget the devastation brought by the hurricanes of 2017, “in the wake of that destruction, something extraordinary happened. Our people united, neighbors helped neighbors, and we began to rebuild not just our structures, but our lives and our sense of hope.”

She pointed to the work done at Walter Hodge as an example of “what can be achieved when we work together and support each other with unwavering determination and strong partnerships.”

Senate President Novelle Francis complimented the work done, and the fresh design approach to affordable housing. “The move to these townhome apartments is definitely a new look for public housing that I expect will have positive results, he said, adding that “it is evident that the Virgin Islands Housing Authority is striving to create a safe and attractive sanctuary for all who call the Walter Hodge pavilion home.”

In his expansive remarks, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. expanded on the theme of a vast network of people all working together to realize a singular vision – not just for Walter Hodge, but for the transformation of the territory as a whole. He mentioned investment partners, legislators, private sector operators and government department employees as all having key roles to play in “how we work together to get problems done.” As a government, Governor Bryan identified the key goal as working together to “give people the strength of mind, the belief in themselves, and the resources to be self-sufficient.”

