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Senate Committee Approves Three Government Property Leases for Agriculture, Heritage, and Rescue Operations

Senate committee approves leases for agricultural development, heritage education center, and St. Thomas Rescue headquarters

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VIAC seeks to lease several plots along Church Street and Hospital Street in Christiansted, St. Croix. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

On Friday, the Senate Committee on Budget Appropriations and Finance unanimously voted in favor of three leases of property owned by the Government of the Virgin Islands.

Bill 35-0211 related to leasing 15 acres of land in Princes Quarter, St. Croix to James Gaston for crop production and rearing small livestock. According to bill sponsor Senator Novelle Francis, “this lease agreement directly supports agriculture and the territory’s goal to work towards greater production and sustainability of our locally grown food supply.”

Mr. Gaston will hold the lease for an initial term of 20 years at a cost of \$225 per year, with a ten-year renewal option. Though he was not present at Friday’s hearing, committee members were all in support of the proposal. Leases like those, Senator Marvin Blyden said are “critical to our growth and our economic development moving forward.”

The second [lease](#), presented as Bill 35-0225, makes provisions for a multiyear agreement between the GVI acting through the Department of Property and Procurement and the V.I. Architecture Center for Built Heritage and Crafts. VIAC seeks to lease several plots along Church Street and Hospital Street in Christiansted, St. Croix “to be used for the common good, welfare, and education of the people of the Virgin Islands on heritage, cultural legacy and other related purposes.” The 50-year lease bears a \$1200 annual cost, paid monthly.

VIAC’s president Mary O’Reilly Dema told committee members that the nonprofit organization intends to develop an “educational center for historic preservation” that will act as a “catalyst for the evolution of the town of Christiansted.” VIAC hopes that the center will eventually “provide opportunities for workforce development and training, small business development and cultural heritage tourism.”

Though a recipient of some grant funding, Ms. Dema shared that VIAC will require approximately \$14 million to rehabilitate the facility, with construction of the final iteration of the facility possibly requiring 15 years to complete. Senator Donna Frett-Gregory wondered how they intend to raise the hefty sum needed for the construction and development project.

Ms. Dema explained that funding will come from several sources, including federal grants which require matching funds, as well as commitments from international partners in Denmark to match fundraising efforts up to \$5 million. Senator Frett-Gregory suggested applying for funding from the Community Development Block Grant Program and told Ms. Dema that “you can lean on me for sure, as I’ve supported you in the past.”

Despite the 15-year projected timeline, Ms. Dema explained that apprenticeship programs designed to teach skills including cabinet building and masonry could begin within the next 5 years.

Other legislators also shared resounding support. Senator Marvin Blyden said he looks forward to “working with all individuals involved to assure all leases and projects [are] fulfilled.” Senator Diane Capehart expressed her support for the bill, citing that she “believe[s] in rehabilitation of our towns.”

Lawmakers also voted in favor of Bill 35-0077, which allowed for the leasing of property to St. Thomas Rescue for the purpose of operating their long-term headquarters. The bill was first presented in 2023 but held in committee to rectify [outstanding issues](#).