

First Bill Seeking to Strengthen USVI Building Codes in 14 Years Breezes Through Committee

DPNR Commissioner Jean Pierre Oriol advocates for stringent building regulations to fortify the territory against future natural catastrophes

Development / **Published On January 31, 2024 04:37 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **January 31, 2024**

Image not found or type unknown



In a move to bolster resilience against natural disasters and enhance safety standards, the U.S. Virgin Islands is set to adopt a series of robust building code changes.

Spearheaded by Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, [Bill 35-0172](#), which breezed through the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning, proposes to amend Title 29, Chapter 5 of the Virgin Islands Code. This revision will incorporate specific provisions from the 2018 edition of the International Building Code, a critical update considering the territory's building codes have remained unchanged since 2010.

The proposed changes are comprehensive and targeted towards mitigating the impacts of natural disasters, especially in the wake of lessons learned from the devastating 2017 hurricanes. Among the key changes, the bill requires hurricane shelters in certain buildings and specifies standards for their design. Additionally, it aims to limit the use of stone and loose materials in roof gardens, enhance flood resistance in flood hazard areas, and enforce stricter guidelines for the construction of one- and two-family dwellings.

A notable emphasis is placed on environmental sustainability and resilience. The bill mandates that roof-mounted solar panels be resistant to hail impact and requires that gutters can withstand wind loads, aligning with nationally recognized standards. It also includes provisions for protecting exposed construction materials from weathering, particularly in cases where residential construction is staged six months and over.

Water supply and fire safety are also addressed. The bill stipulates that cisterns used for fire sprinklers must meet stringent standards, and fire hydrants and water lines serving public housing projects are to comply with requirements in the fire code and a consensus standard. Additionally, a new subsection focuses on jalousie style windows, common in Virgin Island architecture, ensuring they meet specific building code requirements.

Financial considerations are not overlooked. The bill authorizes the Dept. of Planning and Natural Resources commissioner to establish and maintain fees, removing references to outdated fee schedules. This move, along with the definition of “rural area” and “urban area,” is geared towards making the application of certain provisions more equitable across different regions of the territory.

The comprehensive nature of the bill was praised by stakeholders. Julio King, chair of the Virgin Islands Board of General Construction Contractors, hailed it as a "critical step" towards industry best practices, while Jean Pierre Oriol, DPNR commissioner, emphasized the building of more resilient communities.

Despite concerns about DPNR's capacity to enforce these standards, Mr. Oriol noted that the department had a complement of 16 inspectors who work throughout the week, conducting inspections on ongoing construction and renovation across the territory and acting as needed. He said that builders often fail to request an inspection from DPNR, behavior for which he argued “there is no excuse.”

Ms. Frett-Gregory, too, called for greater responsibility on the part of the community. “If you see something, you have to say something.” She called on residents to look out for DPNR’s official permit: “You have to check to see if that yellow paper is there.”

Bill 35-0172 received unanimous support from members of the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning, and will now be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.