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Decades in the Making, a Virgin Islands Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan is Back on the Table for Lawmakers and DPNR

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A long-awaited Comprehensive Land And Water Use Plan (CLWUP) for the Virgin Islands is back on the drawing board – with a few new approaches.

Previous legislatures rejected Department of Planning and Natural Resources' (DPNR) multiple attempts at crafting a master plan for how land and water use should be regulated in the territory. In the absence of a CLWUP, the department has fallen back on the antiquated USVI Zoning Code, adopted into law in 1972, to govern land-use development, policies and procedures.

Members of the Senate Committee on Government Operations, Consumer Affairs, Energy, Environment, and Planning, chaired by Sen. Alicia Barnes, on Thursday met at the Capitol

Building on Thursday to revive the conversation about a CLWUP.

“We have to move forward with this initiative because the Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan (CLWUP) is critical to the various aspects of the Virgin Islands,” said Ms. Barnes. “It is necessary to have a regulatory framework in place. CLWUP affects the progress of agriculture, shorelines, economic growth, hotel development, historic preservation, and transportation.”

“CLWUP is directly related to everything that we are endeavoring to do as it pertains to economic development. By failing to move forward with this plan, we lack vision as leaders,” she added.

DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol said previous attempts at writing a zoning master plan may have been hampered by parochial interests. “I have often stated that I believe a possible reason that the adoption of a CLWUP has not come to pass is an issue of scale. As we focus on the entire territory, some may have the perception that a “one size fits all approach” is being put forward, he said. “What may be acceptable on St. Croix, may not work for St. John or St. Thomas.”

With that in mind, DPNR hopes to develop an island-specific land-use plan for each district. St. John could be first in line “due to the mounting pressures on the island due to the limited land space available.”

Sen. Marvin Blyden inquired about the timeline of completion for CLWUP. Mr. Oriol stated that a timeline is unknown due to the lack of financial resources. However, if funding is identified then the plan can be achieved in three years with assistance from a reputable firm to facilitate management territory-wide.

Ultimately, Ms. Barnes asked DPNR to document the steps necessary to complete the Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan, including an execution plan with prioritized tasks and specific agencies that might provide funding for the project.

Separately, the Government Operations, Consumer Affairs, Energy, Environment, and Planning committee approved Bill No. 33-0132- An Act amending Title 3, chapter 27, section 715 of the Virgin Islands Code to strengthen the Board of the Government Retirement System (GERS) by requiring greater expertise among Board Members.

“The measure seeks to bring flexibility to attract qualified people who have five years of clean concise experience in money management,” said Sen. Kurt Vialet, sponsor of the bill, along with Sen. Janelle Sarauw and co-sponsored by Sen. Stedman Hodge, Jr.

On the contrary, Wilbur Callendar, Chairman of the GERS Board of Trustees stated that the lack of expertise of board members and bad investments is not the cause for the dire state of the system. The problem is due to the lack of adequate funding of the system by the central government, he said.

Rebutting Callendar’s statement, Ms. Sarauw said, “The mere fact that the Board is unknowledgeable of the stock market and anything invested speaks volumes. The only solution they have is for a cash infusion. The board has failed to understand the financial market, investments, acquisitions, and mergers. Not to mention, the Board’s inability to answer basic questions about the fiscal status of the system, reaffirms the position that the Board must have greater expertise.”

The committee also approved Bill No. 33-0250, an Act amending Title 3, chapter 9, section 134a, subsection (b) of the Virgin Islands Code, relating to the duties of the Department of Public

Works, Division of Capital Improvement in administering capital improvement projects.

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