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Medicaid Funds Depleted, Major Road Repairs Planned: Bryan Provides Wide-Ranging Update

Amidst ongoing labor shortages and immigration challenges, Bryan announces infrastructure projects and seeks solutions for healthcare funding, while billion-dollar construction bids attract potential contractors to the USVI

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During Monday's press briefing, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. provided updates on several matters concerning infrastructure and community welfare in the Virgin Islands. Apart from its focus on the ongoing instability plaguing the territory's power plants, the briefing touched on a wide array of topics, including road improvements, housing projects, and community support measures.?

Addressing road conditions, particularly on St. Croix, Governor Bryan noted the challenges posed by the current wet weather. “The rain, we’re grateful for it but it wreaks havoc on the roads,” he said. Additionally, the weather has provided ideal conditions for the growth of vegetation – a boon for local farmers but the bane of officials who strive to keep the roadsides clear of brush. “It’s not only the rain that’s making the bush grow. But then you can’t cut bush in the rain,” the governor said, explaining the quandary. He also noted that some road resurfacing projects have been placed on hold because authorities are awaiting the completion of undergrounding works in those areas.

Mr. Bryan mentioned the entirety of North Shore road as one of those which would be dug up to facilitate the undergrounding of electrical and water services. He also highlighted Mahogany Road as one overdue for comprehensive resurfacing work. “We should be starting within the next 90 days or so to do that,” he estimated, cautioning residents that the project would be extensive. “There’s a lot of work back there, switching the dain and creating culverts and what not.” The main roadways in Frederiksted – Queen and King streets – would also be receiving attention, Governor Bryan promised.

In addition to roadworks, Governor Bryan discussed the abandoned and derelict buildings legislation [currently before the Senate](#). He stressed the need for affordable housing and improved aesthetics in downtown areas. “We need to move this along and increase our affordable housing in our downtown spaces,” he said, pointing out that despite various improvements, the presence of dilapidated buildings detracts from the community’s overall appearance.?

Other draft legislation currently under consideration, the governor noted, includes [efforts to reform sentencing laws](#). “If we can be honest, the mandatory life sentences haven’t really changed anything,” he argued, advocating for giving judges more discretion in sentencing based on the severity of the crime. “We want to make sure that we have the appropriate amount of punishment for the crimes,” he explained. “We want to make sure that we can repatriate people back to our community.”

Bills to address a formal procedure for a person to change their gender as listed on official documents, as well as legislation to streamline procurement requirements and to combine workers compensation with unemployment insurance are also before the Legislature for consideration, Governor Bryan noted.

Health care funding was another key topic. Governor Bryan mentioned a recent bill requesting \$3 million for Medicaid matching funds to ensure continued access to medical care for residents. “We ran out of Medicaid match money,” he disclosed, calling the scenario “a good thing, and it’s a bad thing.” During the Covid-19 pandemic, Governor Bryan noted that the services covered by Medicaid were expanded to include dental treatments and other specialty care. As a result, there was an increase in the number of people seeking services, resulting in the depletion of funds earmarked for Medicaid match by the local government. “No good deed goes unpunished,” the governor joked. He highlighted the importance of maintaining access to affordable healthcare services, noting that over 2,400 people had been serviced by the [territorial health fair](#) that concluded over the weekend.

In response to a question from the Consortium, Governor Bryan also addressed the chronic scarcity of labor in the territory. He noted that political gridlock over immigration makes the question of [advancing visa waiver legislation](#) a non-starter in the current moment. “Immigration is a touchy, touchy subject,” he said. Referencing the current fight on Capitol Hill over what to do about the southern border. However, there are still efforts being made on this front.

“I’m trying to get them to create some nexuses that will allow people to come from the Dominican Republic to the Virgin Islands on work visas,” Governor Bryan said. He also referenced an existing agreement between the United States and Trinidad & Tobago, which allows Trinidadian investors to settle in Miami. “I think ways like that are much quicker,” said the governor, in terms of addressing the territory’s immediate needs for workers. However, he noted that the first two [mega-bundles](#) of projects under the Rebuild USVI heading have issued requests for proposals. The four qualified bidders expected to respond to the RFPs “are already hunting for rooms, man camps and the like to bring people down to work,” Governor Bryan noted, expressing his belief that the territory will be able to adequately address the labor crunch.

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