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# Final Town Hall Meeting Held for USVI Land and Water Use Plan as Decades-Old Zoning Mandate Nears Fulfillment

Community engagement marks a milestone in the development of a comprehensive zoning framework aimed at ending spot zoning and enhancing sustainable land use across the territory

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In roundtables, town hall attendees provide written feedback on the strategies included in the comprehensive plan. By. TSEHAI ALFRED, V.I. CONSORTIUM

Despite legislation dating back to 1970 that mandates a comprehensive land and water use plan for the territory, the U.S. Virgin Islands has continued to lack that framework, which has led to “spot zoning”— zoning exceptions that permit different land use than the surrounding area— and other

community inconveniences. On Thursday, however, Virgin Islanders became one step closer to the decades-long goal, as the Department of Planning and Natural Resources held another town hall meeting in St. Croix for residents to provide feedback on a proposed plan.?

The community meeting was the fourth and final in-person opportunity for DPNR to receive community feedback on the land and water use plan—which was largely developed by an external consultancy group—before the department finalizes and submits it to the 35th legislature by the end of the year. A St. Thomas town hall meeting for the plan was held on Tuesday, while a meeting on St. John was held on the day prior.

Under four “themes”—making better land and water use decisions, protecting our natural resources, preparing for a more sustainable future, and living and thriving together—the plan proposes major zoning and environmental changes desired by the community, including an end to “spot zoning”, the establishment of local planning boards to approve new development and zoning amendments, and the protection and expansion of walking, biking, and public transportation.?

DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre L. Oriol emphasized, however, that the plan is not a regulatory document but “a shared vision” and “roadmap” that will only be enforced if adopted by the Legislature. “It is what is going to guide us through our sustainable land and water use practices—where we see ourselves going in the next 20 to 30 years,” said Mr. Oriol during his opening presentation.?



*In roundtables, town hall attendees provide written feedback on the strategies included in the comprehensive plan (Credit: Tsehai Alfred, V.I. Consortium)*

In roundtable groups, attendees then provided feedback on each proposed strategy in the plan. After discussing the proposals, members of the group assigned them green, yellow, or red stickers—signifying alignment with community interest, satisfaction but additional considerations needed, or complete disagreement—and added any suggestions they felt necessary.

?The attendees provided feedback on strategies under the four major “themes” as well as strategies under the island-specific “Plan for St. Croix”. Goals for the St. Croix plan included food sovereignty and the clean-up of the oil refinery on the Big Island’s south shore. These goals encompassed strategies such as to “coordinate with VIPA to ensure the establishment of new port facilities on the south shore.” These facilities would “include the potential for facilities that can

process and store food in a way that bolsters a local food system,” according to the proposed plan. Although this strategy received all green stickers from one group, members also pointed to the wording of the sentence, which they said was verbose and difficult to digest - a common theme throughout the strategies and something that attendees say could have been addressed before being presented to the community.

Regarding the territorial-wide strategies, one group said that the proposal for a local planning board should have additional measures to ensure that the board members are not favoring new developments and zoning amendments of people related to them or other parties with conflicting interests. Suggesting changes to the strategy that proposes updates and community engagement of the plan every 5-10 years, one community member suggested that the government run an ongoing media campaign on the plan to keep the public informed, especially regarding updates and changes. “You always have to be educating the public,” the resident said.

While the roundtable discussion was the last in-person opportunity for feedback on the plan, community members will be able to continue to [provide feedback online](#) for the next 30 days.?

Candidate for Senate Michael Springer thanked the Mr. Oriol for addressing “spot zoning”, given the criticism he said he faced when involved with Just Right Trucking’s plans to [manufacture concrete blocks](#) in an area zoned for residential and business activity. “We have to be proactive in terms of what we do,” Mr. Springer said, thanking the commissioner for bringing action to the complaints.?

Another resident told the commissioner that he disagreed with the St. Croix plan strategy that proposes to clean up the oil refinery, specifically taking issue with the language of the strategy which identifies the oil refinery as the “former” refinery. “For us, to say the ‘former oil refinery,’ we need to revisit that. Yes, the oil refinery may be a dying industry, but for us, Country Day, Good Hope, and a lot of lawyers, doctors came out of that oil refinery,” the resident said. The refinery is currently owned by Port Hamilton Refining and Transportation, which has from the outset expressed its intention to restarting refinery operations and running the facility as a going concern.

For another attendee, however, the human health concerns that the refinery raised outweigh the economic benefits that has accrued to the community over the years. “But this gentleman was saying about how all of these wonderful agencies and wonderful schools etc. came out of the refinery,” aid Philippa Smith Tyler during a post-town hall interview with the Consortium. “Drug dealers also can produce the same kind of big-time houses, communities, schools, etc. Sorry, I just don't find that that's a viable thing for this island. I don't find that the refinery is beneficial, and the effects are still being suffered,” Ms. Tyler continued. However, despite the refinery debate and other disagreements, Ms. Tyler said that she felt the event facilitated respectful and productive conversation. “So I came out of this feeling respected. My voice matters, and I appreciate that,” Ms. Tyler said.