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DPNR Touts Major Public Participation in the Creation of the USVI's Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan

Commissioner Oriole updates Senate on progress of Virgin Islands' land and water use plan, emphasizing robust public input and collaborative drafting to guide future development and conservation efforts

Senate / **Published On July 16, 2024 07:09 AM /**

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The process involved in drafting the Virgin Islands' Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan has been described as “an amazing, inclusive experience” by Jean-Pierre Oriole, commissioner in the Department of Planning and Natural Resources.

DPNR is the lead agency on the creation of the plan, intended to be a “shared vision for the USVI's future that helps make decisions about what new development looks like.” Nearly two

years in the making, Mr. Oriole provided a status update to the Senate Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning on Monday.

He explained to lawmakers and the listening public that the plan, currently in a draft phase, outlines “how we balance competing uses for our land and waters, how to protect environmentally sensitive areas, waters, coastlines and historic sites, prioritizing future investments in community services and infrastructure.” It also “seeks to ensure that the land use decision-making process is fair, equitable and consistent.” Mr. Oriole also clarified that the Comprehensive Plan is not a regulatory tool, but rather “a framework for how we make decisions.”

As Mr. Oriole made clear, the success of the drafting process so far is thanks in no small part to the contributions of the general public. According to him, 1,500 Virgin Islanders participated in three town hall meetings over the course of 15 months. These meetings were the sounding board for much of what is contained in the draft plan.

“We began the engagement process by asking our stakeholders to summarize where they think we are now and tell us what is important to them,” Mr. Oriole explained. At the second meeting, the public was asked to “provide us what issues need to be addressed.” Among those issues were eliminating the two tier permitting system, abolishing spot zoning, protecting beaches, and ensuring more local control of land use decisions. DPNR used that feedback to create “guiding principles, policy directions and some preliminary goals” which were again brought to the public for feedback. They were encouraged to provide feedback on “island-specific initiatives” and the policies and strategies under various thematic areas.

The four guiding themes of the Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan are making better land and water use decisions, protecting natural resources, preparing a more sustainable future, and living and thriving together.

Moving forward, DPNR will publicize the draft, and anticipates more “public engagement on the draft plan.” Mr. Oriole announced a desire to ventilate the plan within the 35th Legislature’s Committee of the Whole, something that Senate President Novelle Francis says he is willing to do.

Efforts on DPNR’s part to involve the public were touted by lawmakers. For Sen. Francis, the immense community participation signaled that “they really had an interest in in this particular issue.” “I don’t think anybody in the territory can say that they weren’t aware that DPNR was embarking on such a major initiative,” said Sen. Milton Potter, the committee’s chair. However, he wanted to know just how much public feedback went into the creation of the plan.

“The public’s input was what drove the creation of the plan,” replied Jeff Davis, project planner at Horsely Witten, the environmental consulting firm assisting in the planning. He explained that many people attended the first town hall expecting a completed plan that they could subsequently comment on. The guiding themes, he explained, “were built directly around what we heard from the public, as opposed to us starting with assumptions and then changing those assumptions based on what we heard from the public.”

DPNR now intends to embark on an additional public campaign once the plan is finalized. “It’s built into all of our rules and regulations that we have to engage with the public when we’re making changes,” Mr. Oriole shared. “I feel that we can definitely say we’ve done our best to be inclusive,” he told lawmakers.

The public is able to comment on the current draft on the Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan until July 26, available on www.planusvi.com.

