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Local Farm and Food Council Seeks \$3 Million Boost to Meet Growing Demand

Outgoing UVI President Dr. David Hall emphasizes the council's success and urgent need for more funds to support farmers and fishers in the Virgin Islands

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The Soursop fruit. By. GETTY IMAGES

Outgoing UVI President Dr. David Hall, in his capacity as co-chair of the Local Farm and Food Council, praised the council's achievements and efforts during his defense of its FY2025 budget request before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Thursday. "The council has really done a lot and worked well," he stated.

Now a year old, the Council is responsible for supporting the implementation of the Virgin Islands Agriculture Plan, and “is dedicated to fostering the growth and sustainability of agricultural productivity in the Virgin Islands,” Mr. Hall said. The council’s work involves policy advocacy, data collection, community engagement, and strategic partnerships geared at promoting a resilient food system that benefits the wider community. He said that last year was exceedingly successful, but the council's desire to do more for the community requires additional funding.

One program in particular is driving the need for a larger allocation from the local government. In April 2024, the council received \$500,000 through the V.I. Economic Development Authority to establish a Public-Private Partnership Investment Fund grant program. The application period, open for one month, “elicited an enthusiastic response.” Mr. Hall reported that 106 farmers, fishers, and farm organizations applied, with applications totaling \$4,683,541.?

Inadequate funding to offer support to all applicants is why the council is now requesting a \$3 million increase in its FY2025 appropriation. “The substantial gap between available funds and requested amounts exceeded, highlights the overwhelming demand for financial assistance in our agriculture and fishing sectors,” Mr. Hall stated. Based on available funds, the council was only able to support 12 applicants. The \$500,000 appropriated in FY2024 is way short of the need to stimulate increased productivity in the manner that is needed.”

“I was just extremely impressed by the quality of the applications and the needs that were demonstrated,” said the co-chair. The needs indicated by the applicants “demonstrate very clearly that we have to modernize our overall farming community and operations,” he testified.

“We just need more to be able to invest in the various farm and fishing industries,” Mr. Hall responded following a query from Senator Dwayne DeGraff, who wondered what figure would be considered “sufficient” if \$3 million was not available. As he reminded Mr. Hall, the GVI is currently facing major revenue shortfalls. “Any increase is going to help,” said the council’s outgoing co-chair, who in turn reminded lawmakers that the \$500,000 provided last year was only enough to support 12 applicants.

The Local Farm and Food Council is working to achieve nonprofit status that will allow it to receive grants, gifts, and other financial support. Senator Donna Frett-Gregory wondered whether funds generated after the completion of this process could be used to support the grant program. “The challenge is we have no track record yet of being able to raise funds,” Mr. Hall explained.

?With an additional \$3 million requested, the Local Food and Farm’s total budget request is \$4,157,500. The rest of the budget, \$1,157,500, allows the council to execute several projects, several of which commenced in FY2024. However, some projects, including the Agriculture Business Center, are facing delays in becoming operational due to missing funds. “The funds for FY2024 were not received. Level funding for \$250,000 must continue in FY2025,” Mr. Hall explained. “We are hopeful that OMB will provide the funds that were appropriated for this fiscal year.”

Mr. Hall has been lauded by lawmakers for his contributions to the Local Farm and Food Council in the 12 months since its members first met. “The work that has been done is absolutely encouraging. My only concern is the absence of your leadership,” admitted Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory, who [sponsored the legislation](#) that established the council. The council is co-chaired by Agriculture Commissioner Louis Petersen who takes the lead now, as Dr. Hall departs from both that role, and as president of the University of the Virgin Islands.

