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Lawmakers Approve Transfer of Christiansted Property to VIHFA, Aiming to Tackle Housing and Blight

The transfer of the Hill Street property to the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority is seen as a step towards alleviating housing shortages and revitalizing neglected areas, though concerns over planning and data persist among lawmakers

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An affirmative vote by the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance to approve the conveyance of Plot No. 25B Hill Street, Company Quarter, Christiansted, St. Croix to the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority will simultaneously help to lessen the territory's housing challenges, as well as its struggles to deal with [derelict property](#), VIHFA believes. ?

The Government of the Virgin Islands owns the currently derelict property. “The conveyance of this property adds to the VIHFA’s portfolios of property that can be used for affordable housing,” explained Senator Novelle Francis, who presented Bill 35-0303 upon request from Government House. According to Mr. Francis, creating affordable housing is “critical as we work to revitalize our downtowns by bringing residents back to the town.” It’s a move that aims to restore “blight and derelict infrastructure in our towns owned by the GVI.”

The conveyance was wholeheartedly supported by both VIHFA and the Department of Property and Procurement. The DPP is “committed to unlocking the true value to benefit the people of the Virgin Islands,” stated DPP Asst. Commissioner Vincent Richards. Similar sentiments were shared by VIHFA’s executive director Eugene Jones. “The subject property is in an area where there is a potential for urban regeneration and community engagement,” said Mr. Jones.?

VIHFA anticipates several benefits associated with the revitalization of derelict properties. “Improving the quality of life, increasing property values, attracting new investments and fostering social cohesion,” are among the anticipated gains of VIHFA’s three-year housing plan. The authority is in the process of revising and updating the plan.

Housing Committee chair Senator Marvin Blyden agreed that “it’s important to revitalize such blighted areas.” He was curious about the number of units that VIHFA intended to construct on the property, which is only 4491.036 square feet. “We haven’t decided,” replied Mr. Jones. In fact, he says that a needs assessment will only be executed after the authority receives the property. Only then will they determine the size and quantity of units, and then seek the opinion of community members on “what are they looking for.”

?While unable to give specifics about VIFHA’s plan for the Hill Street property, Mr. Jones tried to convince lawmakers that the authority will “make the property look different and representative of the territory.” “As we get participation from the community and stakeholders, I think we’ll come up with a great plan.... I want to make sure that it fits the right footprint of that area,” he said.

Though senators largely agreed that “we need more affordable housing in the community,” committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory expressed reservation over the apparent lack of data driving the authority’s decision-making where housing is concerned. “I’m not certain that we’ve ever heard or gotten a hard number on what that need [is]” she contended. “If we don’t have data, then how do we know what we’re planning for the future,” Senator Frett-Gregory asked of Mr. Jones. She expressed additional concern over selling Virgin Islanders “pipe dreams.”

?Lawmakers learned that Mr. Jones, who has held the position of executive director for four months, was unaware of an already completed housing needs assessment for the territory. “We’re starting over something that we’ve done already,” Senator Frett-Gregory lamented. Perhaps, suggested Senator Francis, the executive director’s ignorance was a result of not being briefed when he commenced the role. “We throw the baby with a bathwater every time somebody new comes in, and not take the time to meet with them and have [these discussions.]”

Senator Frett-Gregory was also hesitant about VIHFA’s intention to rent out the low-income properties, instead of offering a lease-to-own option. “Strong consideration needs to be given to what we want to see for Virgin Islanders... in the future,” she argued. “What we want to see is that Virgin Islanders own their own homes.” While the conveyance could be considered a “simple transaction”, she encouraged her colleagues to “make decisions based on what we want to see for the future.”?

Despite stating that she was “very torn about us making a decision on this absent of knowing what the plan is,” Senator Frett-Gregory would eventually join her colleagues in voting Bill 35-0303 through to the Committee on Jules and Judiciary.

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