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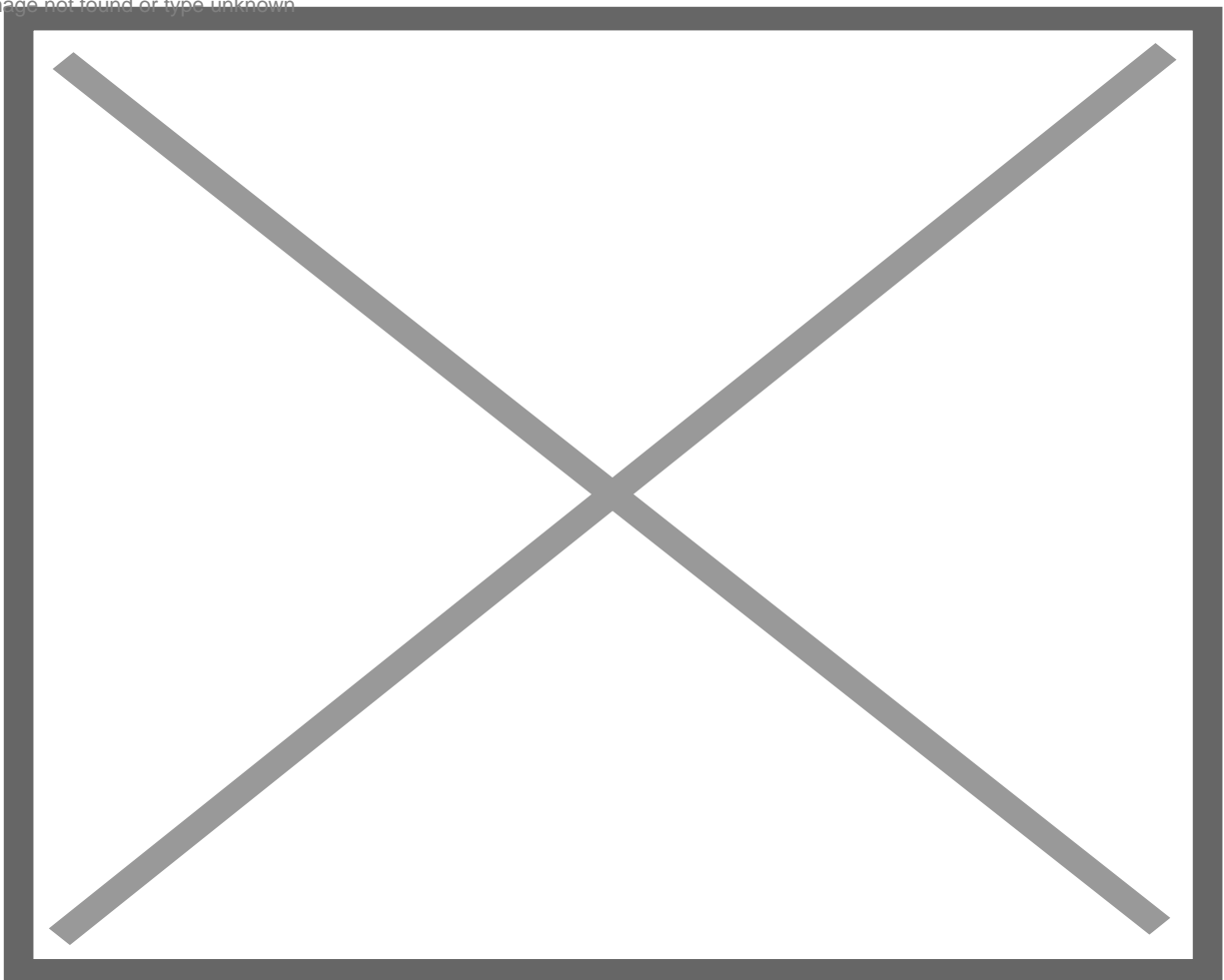
New Undersea Fiberoptic Cabling Project Presented to CZM, Aiming to Boost Connectivity in St. Thomas

The proposal promises enhanced internet speeds and bandwidth by linking St. Thomas to a global network, with environmental safeguards to protect marine habitats during the installation process

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On Thursday, members of the Coastal Zone Management committee heard details about a cabling project set to bring fiber connectivity to St. Thomas.

Benjamin Keularts of Tysam Tech, the company managing the local leg of the project, noted that this was part of a much larger effort that would run a fiber optic cable from Florida. Branches would terminate in “St. Croix, the BVI, and nine other countries,” Mr. Keularts said. The project under consideration by CZM would go from the main trunk that terminates in Butler Bay and run approximately 15 miles of cable “south and southeast to Magens Bay, where it connects up on the

shoreline and runs up to the AT&T building there,” Mr. Keularts explained. Existing undersea cables follow a similar route, he told CZM officials.

Environmental concerns are minimal, but the presence of coral in several sections, as well as seagrass that provides habitat for fish, means that “placement will have to be done carefully” in those areas, to prevent damage and disruption to the marine habitat, Mr. Keularts noted. The cable itself will be “double armored” to protect it from damage in the relatively shallow waters through which it will run, he said.

In preparation for the project, Mr. Keularts said that extensive surveys were conducted between 2022 and 2023. Construction is expected to begin next year. “The idea is that into June 2025 will be this main trunk that goes from Vero Beach, Florida down to St. Croix, and installation will be successful there before moving on to this St. Thomas branch,” Mr. Keularts said. Installation work on St. Thomas should be complete by 2026, he estimated.

The cabling project, when completed, is expected to provide more bandwidth, and more capability to the territory. “There's such a global need for more fiber,” said Dennis Peters, vice president of the Gulf South Research Corporation, providing the rationale for the Trans Americas Fiber project. AT&T, the main leaseholder, would then subcontract to local providers who could access this greater bandwidth to improve telecommunications services for Virgin Islanders. “The new technology provides a new generation of speed, bandwidth and security that we have not had in the last 10-15 years,” Mr. Peters continued.

The CZM will render its decision on whether or not to award a permit for the project to move forward at a subsequent meeting.