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In Their Words: USVI Voters Reveal Hopes and Concerns Ahead of Election

As the territory prepares for elections, residents discuss the critical issues they face, including infrastructure neglect, economic challenges, and the need for responsive representation

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2024 election signage on St. Croix. By. JANEKA SIMON, V.I. CONSORTIUM

ST. CROIX — Over the past several weeks, the U.S. Virgin Islands has become more and more festooned with signs both large and small, each promoting a different electoral candidate. With Election Day less than 24 hours away, Consortium journalists wanted to find out what voters thought about their choices for representatives, and the political environment in general.

We spoke to three residents of St. Croix, and this is what they had to say.

“I want to see a difference,” said Shanda Ramnarine, a Virgin Islander with Trinidadian roots. “The struggle is real and...not much improvement, as far as I can see.” Ms. Ramnarine says she is active in the political process, having participated in party primaries earlier this year. One of her top concerns is the ongoing billing crisis at the V.I. Water and Power Authority. She says that whoever comprises the 36th Legislature needs to address the problem urgently. Another issue is the sluggish pace when it comes to rolling out retroactive payments for former government workers. “My husband worked for the government for over 30 years. He died, and we're still waiting to get these retro monies that were granted.”

According to Ms. Ramnarine, for too long there has been too much talk by lawmakers, but not enough action on key issues faced by Virgin Islanders. “We are tired of this. We want to see change,” she declared, pointing out the plight of the homeless, and of senior citizens. “You remember them when you want their vote,” she admonished lawmakers. “Do we ever go out there to visit and see what their needs are?”

Despite her frustrations about the slow pace of progress on St. Croix and the Virgin Islands in general, Ms. Ramnarine was pragmatic about prospects for change. She acknowledged that it was the citizenry who needed to press their elected officials – not just when they came to campaign, but throughout their tenure in office. She urged young voters not to be discouraged, advising that change takes time and effort. “There's always hope, and with hope comes change,” she remarked.

While Ms. Ramnarine is waiting for Tuesday to cast her ballot, Charles D. Peters, award-winning photographer and renowned architect, had already done so. He told the Consortium that he usually votes early to avoid the crowds and as a hedge against a potential emergency situation.

Mr. Peters said he felt positively about the slate of candidates this year. “I'm pretty comfortable with what we have,” he remarked. “I'm satisfied with the level of intelligence that we have on the slates, on both sides of the aisle.”

Top of mind issues for Mr. Peters include “financing, education, agriculture and health, those are always my main concerns.” Some of the lawmakers he has supported over the years have done a “fantastic job” in addressing these key issues over the years, he believes, but Mr. Peters acknowledges that there is still a lot more work to be done.

According to Mr. Peters, the recent lack of robust economic growth on St. Croix is caused by one major factor. “Number one, we lost our population growth. We lost heavy investors, big time, and we lost a lot of talent, a brain drain came along.” He believes a focus on facilitating entrepreneurship on the Big Island could help address the slide.

Like Ms. Ramnarine before him, Mr. Peters had a similar message for young voters. “The status quo is not going to change overnight,” he said, encouraging people to cut through the noise and focus on the issues that matter to them. A change in voting culture also needs to happen, Mr. Peters believes. “We can't just say I'm going to vote for him because he's my friend, he's my cousin...he's my this and my that.” The bottom line, says Mr. Peter, is awareness and understanding of the issues faced by Virgin Islanders. “The people that are voting, they need to be educated,” he argued, suggesting that younger voters sit with their elders to discuss policy and strategy when it comes to making a decision regarding their elected leaders.

Aloy “Wenty” Nielsen is another early voter who chooses to do so to avoid the crowds. “I don't have to fight all the people handing me little pamphlets and all that stuff,” he joked. His top issue is the economy. “I think we could do better,” said the man [whose name graces the Christiansted bypass road](#). He believes his choice of candidates are up to the task. “I think they are capable of

making the right decisions, or at least coming up with legislation that could do that.”

Another big concern is the conditions of the territory's road infrastructure. As the former Director of the Federal-aid Highway Program for the Virgin Islands, Mr. Nielsen says it “hurts me to see the condition of the roads right now.” He argues that proper attention is not being paid to St. Croix. “It's my understanding that we don't even have an assistant commissioner of the islands, which is totally ridiculous. Everything seems to be running out of the St. Thomas office.” Noting there is “twice as much mileage of roads on St. Croix” as there is on St. Thomas, Mr. Nielsen believes elected officials need to stop treating the Big Islands as “some sort of outpost.”

Acknowledging that the executive branch of government is primarily responsible for the day-to-day administration of the territory, Mr. Nielsen nevertheless believes that Crucian legislators can do more to advocate for their island. “They could hold [the administration] much more accountable than they're doing right now,” he argued. “That's the only way things are going to change – if you put pressure on them.”

That pressure, Mr. Nielsen says, cannot just be the responsibility of lawmakers, however. “Me and you, the voting public, are not putting enough pressure on the administration. We're too accepting of things going on.” He called for more public scrutiny of elected officials, and said that the public needs to hold their representatives accountable “throughout the year and every year,” suggesting that the formation of citizens’ committees may help channel that public scrutiny. “The people need to be more active, be more vocal. That's the type of thing that puts pressure on decision-making.”