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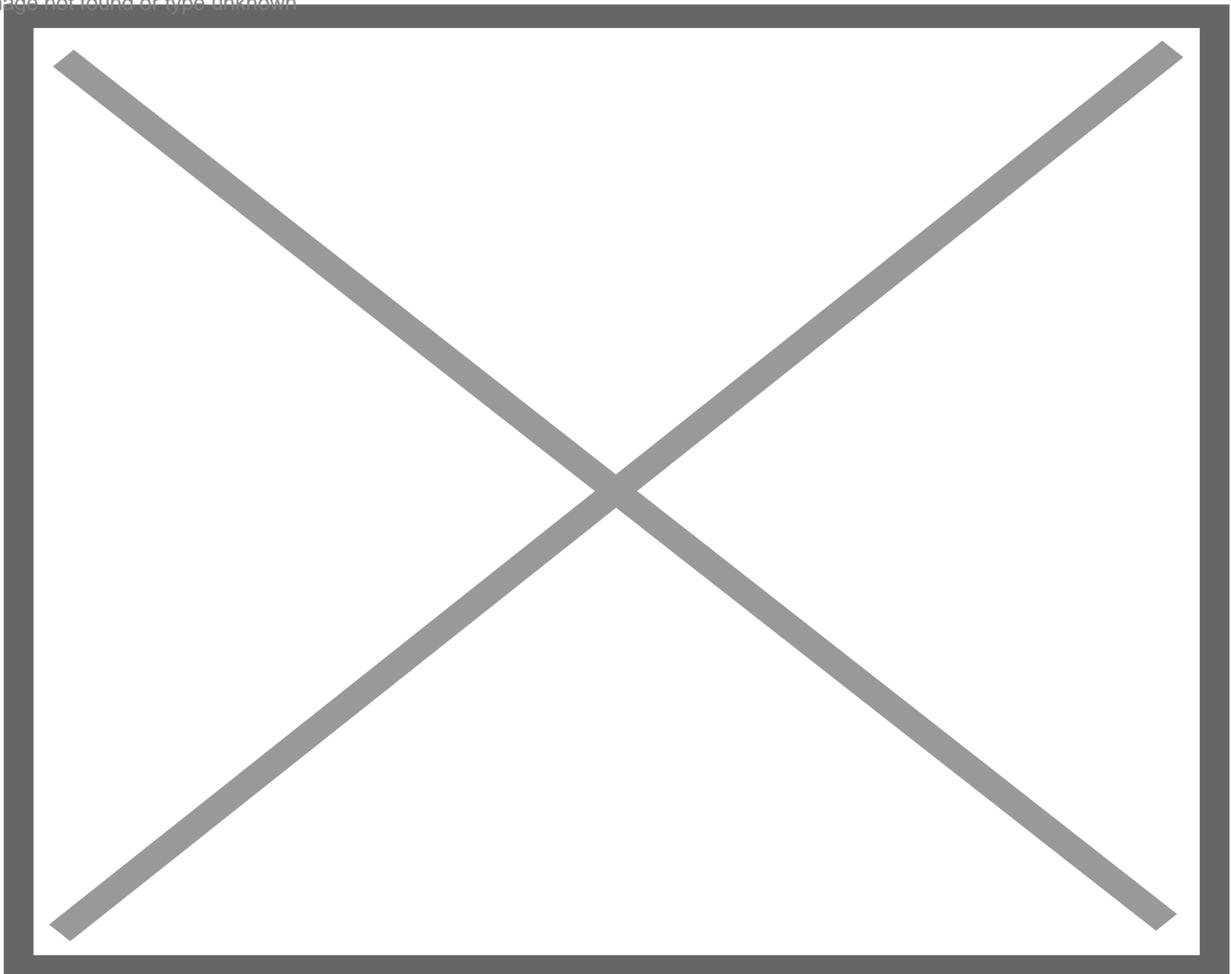
FIFA-Backed Soccer Complex in St. Thomas Advances, Bringing Opportunities for Youth and Economy

The U.S.V.I Soccer Federation's project, expected to span 3-5 years, will feature a professional pitch, training rooms, and dormitories, aiming to attract international competitions and boost youth soccer development

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Soccer enthusiasts on the island of St. Thomas will soon have access to a FIFA-regulation playing facility in Estate Nazareth, a site long earmarked for sporting facilities like cricket and track and field.

On Thursday, members of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance voted in favor of Bill 35-0385, moving the U.S.V.I Soccer Federation Inc., one step closer to building the FIFA-

regulation facility along Parcel N-1 Remainder of Tract 1 Estate Nazareth, No. 1 Red Hook Quarter. The project is expected to cost as much as \$5 to \$7 million in total investments and is already pre-approved for funding by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association.

A similar facility already exists on St. Croix, with the Federation already investing approximately \$4 million toward its completion. “The Virgin Islands will have two facilities to maximize the exposure internationally,” said Michael Bourne, a Federation council member.

The project is expected to be constructed over three to five years, and once completed will include a soccer pitch, fencing, bleachers, lighting, concession stands, bathrooms, team facilities, referee facilities, training rooms, parking and dorms. The pitch, however, is “priority number one, to enable soccer to be played,” per Mr. Bourne. The remaining amenities, he said, will be built over time. The local federation is currently working with FIFA as “they build these types of facilities around the world and provide us with immense knowledge, vendors and resources,” said Mr. Bourne.

The project’s architect, Jeffery Boschulte, told the committee that special considerations have been given to the building’s design to reduce wind blowing from the east which could impact soccer games. Additionally, a significant amount of work will go into improving drainage in the area. The Federation is expected to return to the Legislature soon to request the rezoning of the land on which the facility will sit – moving it from its current Residential designation to Public.

The Estate Nazareth soccer facility is described as “a very critical turning point for us in the Virgin Islands.” The U.S.V.I Soccer Federation anticipates related economic benefits as St. Thomas will eventually be able to hold regional and even international soccer competitions. Though the pitch won’t be ready ahead of the FIFA World Cup in the United States in 2026, the Federation believes that the St. Thomas field will put the USVI “on the radar for them to be able to consider this as maybe the training facility in preparation for their matches.”

The Federation also anticipates introducing youth to a “broad spectrum” of pathways including coaching, refereeing, training, and media work.

“Oh, wow. That sounds good,” remarked Senator Marvin Blyden. He was buoyed by talk of increased economic activity and opportunities for the youth. “I look forward to especially seeing the involvement of our young people when it comes to soccer,” he said.

Yohannes Worede, the Federation’s president, sought to allay concerns harbored by Senator Ray Fonseca that the facility would be for the exclusive use of Federation members. “The whole purpose behind having this facility is to make it accessible to all people that are interested in playing soccer,” Mr. Worede explained. “I’m so proud that the 35th Legislature is going to be able to act on this,” Senator Fonseca responded.

Senator Dwayne DeGraff, meanwhile, playfully asked whether there would be opportunities for his generation to learn to play soccer. “Our most important focus is under 20-year-old players, but yes,” Mr. Bourne replied. The Federation also intends to continue referee and coaching workshops targeting a more mature audience.

The U.S.V.I Soccer Federation anticipates breaking ground on the project as soon as their lease agreement and upcoming rezoning request are approved.