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Legislators Advance \$300K Shooting Range and Energy Warehouse Projects for St. Thomas

Three local lease agreements receive committee backing, supporting renewable energy storage, firearm safety education, and aviation security, with significant investments and employment opportunities on the horizon

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Hugo Hodge, owner of HKT Energy Consulting Group, speaks before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance regarding a lease for a new office and warehouse space on St. Thomas. **By. V.I. LEGISLATURE**

The Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance has approved leases to allow existing local businesses to expand and increase operations and business offerings.

The first, Bill 35-0382, is a lease between the Government of the Virgin Islands, the Department of Property and Procurement and HKT Energy Consulting Group, LLC for Reconfigured Parcel No. 114 Submarine Base, No. 4 Southside Quarter, St. Thomas. HKT Energy Consulting Group is a “full-service energy consulting firm offering professional technical and engineering consulting services.” The company owner, Hugo Hodge, intends to use the property for an office and warehouse space.

The property in question is 13,582 square feet and features a hurricane-damaged, one-story steel frame structure. HKT Energy Consulting Group anticipates spending approximately \$107,500 in renovation investment for the property and is expected to pay an annual rent of \$45,600. “A long-term lease allows for time to recoup the significant investment required to repair the existing structural damage from the hurricanes and subsequent build-out of the office and warehouse,” Mr. Hodge explained. The warehouse will be used to store solar panels, batteries, and other related equipment.

The bill faced no opposition from legislators. Senator Marvin Blyden was curious about the number of new jobs that could be generated. Mr. Hodge explained that while job creation will be “more during the construction phase,” he anticipated that as the company grows and undertakes more solar installations, “there’ll be maybe a couple dozen employees at the time.”

Lawmakers also supported Bill 35-0386, a lease agreement between the GVI and Star Time Firearms, LLC d/b/a Precision Shooting Range for a portion of Parcel No. 1A Estate Bovoni, Nos. 1 and 2 Frenchmans Bay Quarter, St. Thomas. The property measures 1.68 U.S. acres, and it will cost Star Time Firearms \$48,000 to rent the land on an annual basis. The business’s owner, Levi MacSheen plans to use the land to operate a firearm training facility and shooting range. Mr. MacSheen has already begun excavation work to ensure the noise from the range does not disturb neighboring properties, despite there being no homes nearby.

“Our goal is to operate a state-of-the-art shooting range on the island of St. Thomas,” testified Mr. MacSheen. He intends to offer “firearm education and safety training as well as competition events.” Currently, the only other shooting range in the St. Thomas/St. John district is utilized by the V.I. Police Department, and “does not address the growing needs for public access to a safe, controlled environment” for residents to practice and learn about firearm safety, said Mr. MacSheen.

The federally licensed firearm dealer also wants to continue his public education outreach efforts through the shooting range. “With the increase of firearm ownership, it is critical that Virgin Islanders have access to proper education [on] responsible firearm use,” he told the committee. Mr. MacSheen plans to target youth on the “dangers of illegal firearm use [and] the importance of conflict resolution.”

The effort is projected to cost \$250,000 to \$300,000 and will employ seven to ten individuals during the construction phase. A similar number of full-time roles will be created after construction, with the opportunity to hire two to three part-time staff, according to Mr. MacSheen.

Lawmakers also supported Mr. MacSheen’s request. Senator Javan James was interested in a projected start date for the construction. “We are prepared to start as soon as possible...once the lease is actually executed,” he replied. “A tentative date for opening should be the first of the year,” referring to 2025.

The committee also approved Bill 35-0387, a multi-year lease agreement between the United States of America by and through the Department of Transportation Federal Aviation

Administration, and the GVI for Plot No. 10 Estate White Lady, West End Quarter, St. Croix to be used for the continued operation of a Locator Outer Marker and FAA activities. The equipment, which is already present on the property, allows aircraft to land safely during periods of bad weather.

All three bills will be considered once more when they are taken up by the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.

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