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Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan Unveiled: Focus Shifts to Implementation and Funding

After two years and \$1.5 million in development, the plan sets sustainable goals for St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John; lawmakers question DPNR's capacity to execute the vision, emphasizing the need for staffing and coordination

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DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Two years after the Department of Planning and Natural Resources began work on the territory's Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan, the framework is being [presented](#) to the Legislature for further action.

On Tuesday, DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol appeared before the Committee of the Whole to provide a summary of the now-finalized plan. DPNR is legally bound to develop such a plan. According to Mr. Oriol, it is a “shared vision for the USVI’s future that helps us make decisions about what new development looks like and where it happens.”

“The plan must consider how we balance competing uses for our land and waters, how to protect environmentally sensitive areas, waters, coastlines and historic sites, prioritizing future investment in community service and infrastructure,” said the commissioner. It will ensure the land use decision-making process is “fair, equitable and consistent.” The district-specific and territory-wide goals outlined in the plan consider the opinions of a wide cross-section of Virgin Islands society, with over 1,500 residents participating in a series of town hall meetings.

“Over the last week, we’ve reviewed and incorporated these comments, and now we present the VI Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan to the 35th Legislature for approval,” Mr. Oriol beamed. Island-specific plans include “re-establishing government services on government-owned property” on St. John, alongside “a desire to enhance Cruz Bay as a walkable town.” For St. Croix, recommendations varied from “maximizing the potential for our food sovereignty to capitalizing fully on the National Heritage Area designation.” With respect to St. Thomas, “the focus of the community is the redevelopment of our areas, incorporating a mix of uses, but using a watershed approach to alleviate some of the historical problems such as flooding.”

Committee members commended DPNR for completing the plan and lauded the regular involvement of community members in the process. Several lawmakers remarked on the goals outlined therein, but Senator Donna Frett-Gregory was instead interested in the implementation of the plan, particularly after learning that the development of the plan cost in the region of \$1.5 million.

“Who’s going to manage all of this?” she asked Mr. Oriol, noting that the plan outlines responsibilities for several departments including the Legislature. “There must be some coordination around it... How do we truly make this happen realistically?” Coordination, Mr. Oriol replied, is legally required to take place within the Department of Planning and Natural Resources. Sen. Frett-Gregory, however, was concerned about the department’s staffing capacity.

“Realistically, you’re already stretched thin in your organization,” she observed. “As the 36th Legislature convenes, this should be at the top of the agenda. If you ask me, the real work has just started.”

Senator Milton Potter, for his part, also wondered if DPNR truly possessed adequate human resources to implement the various goals and objectives under the plan. He encouraged DPNR to develop a “definitive outline as to staffing.” Increasing staffing “can be done incrementally,” said Nathan Kelly, invited to testify on behalf of the Horsley Witten Group, Inc., assisting in the development of the plan. He suggested adding 10-12 staff members over ten years to handle specific components. “We have the plan, but there’s still another huge lift,” stated Sen. Potter.

Frett-Gregory was also initially also concerned about the funding required for the implementation of several of the outlined goals, but was buoyed by Mr. Oriol’s announcement of the availability of \$84 million in Community Block Development Grant-MIT funds specifically for planning. “We’re not trying to use any local resources. We’ve already identified a number of other resources,” he said.

Marlon Hibbert, director of the Division of Coastal Zone Management also chimed in, sharing with the committee that DPNR is already using the draft version of the plan “as a tool to draw the

federal agencies that we look towards for technical assistance.” To date, DPNR has been awarded \$900,000 “that will help to advance some of the goals and objectives already in this plan.” DPNR has also received \$300,000 to conduct a geospatial survey, a necessity alluded to by Sen. Angel Bolques Jr. earlier in the meeting. “The adoption will help strengthen the vehicle that we need to get more from our partners inside and outside the territory,” said Mr. Hibbert.

It is anticipated that the plan will soon return to the Legislature with an appropriate bill number to allow lawmakers to vote on its ratification and adoption.

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