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Tourism, Infrastructure, and Public Services Take Center Stage in Governor Bryan's 7th SoTA

Governor Bryan announced a 22% increase in tourism, major infrastructure developments, and over \$22.5 billion in disaster recovery funding while addressing issues like crime and economic inflation.

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Governor Albert Bryan Jr. on Monday night delivered his 7th State of the Territory Address at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Chamber in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Governor Albert Bryan Jr.'s seventh State of the Territory Address, delivered Monday evening before the 36th Legislature, provided a wide-ranging overview of the U.S. Virgin Islands' wins

over the past year, the territory's current struggles, and plans for the future.

His remarks – delayed by two weeks to direct public attention to the swearing-in of the 36th Legislature and then the inauguration of President Donald Trump – covered economic and tourist growth, public infrastructure, education, disaster recovery, crime, healthcare, sustainable development, sports, and allegations of public corruption. Maintaining a generally positive tone throughout, Governor Bryan announced that “the simple truth is that we have made progress —tremendous strides— in the face of new and daunting challenges.”

“We stabilized the Government of the Virgin Islands’ failing pension system, paid hundreds of millions in overdue obligations, and addressed the millions in arrears to the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority,” he said in a synopsis of 2024 major accomplishments.

Mr. Bryan shifted his attention to the strides made in the local economy, which he says “stands out as a shining example of growth and opportunity.” According to the governor, the tourism industry is largely responsible for this growth. The tourism industry, he reported, has surpassed pre-pandemic levels “by 22% and increased air arrivals by an astounding 44% compared to 2019.” Airport upgrades, a major dredging project in Charlotte Amalie, and dock improvements on the Ann E. Abramson Marine Facility — under the leadership V.I. Port Authority Executive Director Carlton Dowe — are expected to contribute to the expansion of the sector. Similar contributions are expected from the 120-room Hampton Inn, set to be the “first new hotel constructed in the territory in 45 years.”

This growth is expected to be supplemented by a host of infrastructural projects, including upgrades to downtown areas. Governor Bryan used the Veterans’ Drive improvements on St. Thomas as an example. On St. Croix, work continues on the segment of Melvin H. Evans Highway between Good Hope and Williams Delight, where long-awaited streetlights are finally being installed, the governor announced. The Clifton Hill Connector Project is expected to be completed this summer, while a notice to proceed has been issued for reconstructing the Ethel McIntosh Memorial Drive (Mahogany Rd.). There are rehabilitation projects in the pipeline for Strand, King, and Queen Streets in Frederiksted.

“The bridge at East Airport Road will reopen within 30 days, and construction on Midland Road and bridge repairs to Route 669 near the Rudolph E. Schulerbrandt Agricultural Complex in St. Croix are well underway, with completion expected before June,” promised Governor Bryan.

Monday’s address also focused on educational infrastructure. The territory’s leader was pleased to share that the construction of five Head Start Facilities should be completed by this September. The newly established Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance is tasked with ensuring all students have a “safe and functional” learning environment. “From replacing air conditioning units and repairing roofs to addressing drainage and sewage issues, we are transforming our schools into places where students and educators can thrive,” Governor Bryan declared. Several schools are also earmarked for construction under the Super Project Management Office’s first bundle of St. Thomas school facilities.

Also promised to come online this September, the Virgin Islands Technical College will be established to provide certification in practical skills as the territory prepares for a construction boom.

In sport infrastructure updates, the Vincent Mason Pool is expected to be completed by summer. And “while we continue to feel exasperated with the current contractor, we can finally see light at

the end of the Paul E. Joseph Stadium project,” Governor Byran said, adding that the light was hazy. He also did not give a timeline for completion of the stadium.

The exasperation over chronic delays with another project, however, has seemingly reached its limit. Though horse racing enthusiasts in St. Thomas have enjoyed racing since the last Carnival seasoning, the same cannot be said for St. Croix. In late 2024, VIGL — responsible for the construction of the Randall “Doc” James Racetrack — appeared before the Legislature to provide a [less-than-stellar progress report](#). Now, [the government is taking action](#). “It should be evident to all that VIGL does not have the wherewithal, nor the resources, to rebuild the track,” said Governor Byran. “Today, the Department of Justice filed a suit against VIGL for breach of contract.”

Meanwhile, the governor was keen on the future of several disaster recovery projects, with the total amount for disaster recovery increasing to \$22.5 billion, up from \$16 billion. This, as all Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) Public Assistance projects have been obligated. Recent pronouncements by President Donald Trump relating to the [dismantling of FEMA](#), however, have raised some concerns.

Progress in the EnVIision program, VI Slice, and other homeownership opportunities were presented by the governor. The Consortium will provide more comprehensive coverage of these status updates in separate reports.

Virgin Islanders should also anticipate a series of healthcare infrastructure projects. “The demolition of the Charles Harwood Memorial Complex has been completed and the new Donna M. Christian Christiansen Department of Health building in Richmond is scheduled to begin construction this year,” he shared. The territory’s hospitals - the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital and the Schneider Regional Medical Center - are “scheduled to be out to bid in the first quarter of this year.” The governor was aware of what he called “apparent gaps in the form and function” of the JFL North Facility but was excited about the transition of the hospital’s dialysis facility to a brick-and-mortar home by the summer.

Where senior citizen facilities are concerned, Governor Bryan announced that “we are set to invest \$200 million in long-term senior care residential facilities on St. Croix and St. Thomas.”

While the territory is expected to operate as an active construction zone in short order, a series of issues continue to plague the community. Governor Bryan recalled the troubles with the Water and Power Authority, necessitating the declaration of a state of emergency. The Waste Management Authority remains on unstable footing, with Governor Bryan appealing to the Legislature to “work together with the Public Services Commission to bring a permanent resolution to this issue,” alluding to the establishment of waste collection fees.

The Virgin Islands continues to grapple with inflation, with the cost of everyday items becoming out of reach for several. “As an Administration, we have faced this problem head-on and continue to seek ways to ease the burden on households,” said a hopeful Governor Bryan. He referenced keeping power rates down and the expansion of SNAP and other Human Service and housing benefits expected to help families shoulder the blow. “While the prices of milk, chicken, rent, gas, and interest rates have risen, your WAPA rates have remained the same,” he declared proudly. This is the result of approximately \$100 million in subsidies paid to WAPA, utilizing American Rescue Plan Act funding, along with local dollars.

A less positive tone was adopted when the governor addressed challenges posed by crime. Nonetheless, he assured that the government is “taking bold and decisive steps toward a safer,

more just Virgin Islands.” New, “cutting-edge technology”, including a Traffic Light Enforcement System, is expected to be installed.

This year, Governor Bryan is urging collective action. “I remain concerned about how we continue to delay our full potential and the prosperity we have worked hard to build. Opportunities to break free from poverty and improve our lives are here, yet too many of us seem either unprepared or afraid to take action,” he lamented, though he held out hope for “full participation” from Virgin Islanders.

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