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Bryan Pushes for Visa Waiver Program, Permanent Rum Cover-Over, and Refinery Reopening at IGIA Meeting

Bryan advocates at the IGIA meeting for a permanent rum cover-over extension, the reopening of the St. Croix refinery, and a visa waiver program to boost the USVI economy, strengthen tourism, and address workforce shortages amid ongoing recovery efforts.

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Governor Albert Bryan Jr., right, and Interior Secretary Doug Burgum at the Interagency Group on Insular Areas meeting in Washington. By. GOVERNMENT HOUSE

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. continues to advocate for key economic initiatives affecting the U.S. Virgin Islands, using the 2025 Interagency Group on Insular Areas (IGIA) meeting as a platform

to push for the permanent extension of the rum cover-over tax rate, the reopening of the St. Croix refinery, and the establishment of a visa waiver program to strengthen the territory's economy.

According to Government House, during his testimony, Governor Bryan congratulated U.S. Department of the Interior Secretary Doug Burgum on his leadership role, stressing the importance of collaboration between the federal government and U.S. territories.

The governor underscored the economic importance of the rum cover-over program to the USVI, which returns federal excise taxes on rum produced in the Virgin Islands to the territory's treasury. This funding, which historically accounts for nearly 33% of the USVI's general revenue, directly supports public services, infrastructure projects, and debt obligations, Mr. Bryan said. However, since the expiration of the \$13.25 per proof gallon rate in 2021, the cover-over revenues have declined by 20%, adding financial strain to the territory's budget.

Governor Bryan urged Congress and the administration to engage in discussions to secure a permanent extension of the \$13.25 rate, allowing for long-term financial stability and retroactive relief to recover lost revenues. "While the Virgin Islands has always appreciated Congress's efforts to support the territory through tax extenders, the uncertainty of temporary extensions makes it difficult to plan for the future," Bryan stated. "We're committed to working with our federal partners to ensure a permanent solution."

Reopening the St. Croix Refinery

The governor also highlighted the potential benefits of reopening the St. Croix refinery, which has historically contributed \$25 million annually in tax revenue and provided significant employment opportunities. The refinery has remained closed since 2022 due to regulatory challenges, despite substantial private investments aimed at revitalizing its operations.

"Reopening the refinery would not only restore jobs and tax revenue for the Virgin Islands but also strengthen energy security for the broader region," Bryan explained. "We are committed to working closely with federal agencies to ensure the refinery can reopen responsibly and sustainably."

Proposing a Visa Waiver Program for Economic Growth

Recognizing the importance of tourism and labor support for the USVI's economic recovery, Governor Bryan continued to push for the establishment of a special visa waiver program. Modeled after similar programs in Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, the initiative would allow short-term, visa-free visits from neighboring Caribbean nations and select global markets, boosting tourism and addressing workforce shortages.

"A targeted visa waiver program would not only expand tourism but also provide the temporary labor force we need to support ongoing recovery efforts and infrastructure projects," Bryan said. "With so many federally funded recovery initiatives underway, the demand for skilled and unskilled workers far exceeds our local capacity. A visa waiver program can help close that gap while boosting economic activity."

The proposed program would:

- Attract more visitors from Caribbean and international markets, boosting tourism.

- Support tourism-related industries, including hospitality and retail.
- Provide temporary workers to assist with ongoing recovery and construction projects.
- Strengthen the Virgin Islands as a regional hub for business and leisure travel.

Governor Bryan assured that necessary security measures would be in place, as the Virgin Islands remains outside the U.S. customs zone, ensuring all travelers are screened before accessing the mainland.

Throughout his testimony, the governor emphasized the importance of strong federal partnerships and praised Secretary Burgum's leadership at the Department of the Interior. He noted that Burgum's experience as a former governor provides valuable insight into the unique challenges facing U.S. territories.

The territory's leader reaffirmed his administration's commitment to advocating for the territory's needs in Washington, stating, "We will continue engaging with members of Congress, the White House, and federal agencies to ensure that the Virgin Islands remains a priority in national policy discussions. The rum cover-over, the refinery, and the visa waiver program are all critical not just to our economic resilience, but also to our long-term recovery. We look forward to working with our federal partners to turn these goals into realities."