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Governor Bryan, Premier Wheatley Discuss Maritime Fees, Agree to Pause Implementation

As USVI-based charter operators raise concerns over increased BVI fees, both leaders pledged to explore a fair regulatory framework. Discussions included a temporary pause on policy changes and long-term solutions such as customs pre-clearance facilities

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Governor Albert Bryan Jr. and BVI Premier Natalio Wheatley engage in discussions on maritime fees during a key meeting in Tortola on Friday, March 7, 2025. By. GOVERNMENT HOUSE

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. and British Virgin Islands Premier Natalio Wheatley met on Friday to discuss ongoing maritime policy concerns, particularly the BVI's proposed fee increases for non-

BVI-based charter operations. The discussion focused on how these changes could affect the economic relationship between the U.S. Virgin Islands and the BVI, particularly for businesses that rely on maritime access between the two territories.

The proposed fee increases and entry restrictions have raised concerns among USVI-based charter operators, many of whom depend on BVI waters for their businesses. Governor Bryan highlighted the economic challenges that could arise from these policies, including the closure of some operations, and stressed the importance of fair and reciprocal policies that support businesses in both territories.

During the meeting, Wheatley acknowledged the concerns raised and indicated a willingness to review the proposed fee structure while also considering an increase in the number of term charters allowed from the USVI to the BVI. Both leaders agreed to put a temporary hold on the implementation of the new policies to allow for further review and continued discussions.

Bryan stressed that ongoing communication between both governments is essential in navigating complex maritime policies, noting that these challenges extend beyond just the Virgin Islands.

"Having these discussions is important. This is not just a Virgin Islands issue or a Greater Virgin Islands issue—it is a challenge being faced on an international scale," Bryan said. "As we navigate these political hurdles, communication is key. Coming here to the BVI to discuss the issue, understanding the various moving parts gives us a broader playing field to craft an agreement that makes sense for both our people and the industry. What we decided today is to examine the numbers and work together on a solution that benefits everyone."

Premier Wheatley, while emphasizing that no final agreements had been reached, stated that the meeting laid a strong foundation for continued cooperation between both governments.

"Governor Bryan represented the interests of the U.S. Virgin Islands robustly, and of course, I did the same on our side," Premier Wheatley said. "But the important thing is that we were able to discuss common ground and areas of mutual cooperation. While we were not able to reach any firm conclusions today, we made a commitment to go back and crunch the numbers to ensure that we maintain equity, and we made a commitment to fairness in this relationship."

Both leaders discussed the need for a regulatory framework that ensures economic opportunities for maritime businesses, including charter vessels, water taxis, ferries, and fishing operators. Governor Bryan stated that the USVI is also evaluating potential policy adjustments that could include:

- The introduction of security fees for non-USVI residents entering and exiting USVI waters
- Strengthened enforcement of maritime regulations to ensure compliance

Additionally, long-term solutions were explored, including the possibility of customs pre-clearance facilities to streamline commercial and recreational maritime traffic between the USVI and BVI.

Governor Bryan expressed optimism following the discussions, stating that maintaining a cooperative maritime relationship is key to economic stability in both territories.

"The Virgin Islands—both U.S. and British—have long benefited from a shared maritime economy that fuels our prosperity," Bryan said. "By continuing to work together, we can develop policies that foster growth on both sides of the water, ensuring that our people and businesses

continue to thrive."

Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach also spoke on the importance of an agreement that ensures equitable maritime access and allows visitors to experience the Virgin Islands as a whole, rather than being restricted by territorial divisions.

"I look forward to a resolution of these issues that will lead to an experience for our visitors and for their visitors to really be able to experience the beautiful Virgin Islands that is not bifurcated by the fact that one is U.S. and one is British," Roach stated. "These waters and these wonderful shores and pristine places that we get to inhabit, that others, when they visit the U.S. Virgin Islands or the British Virgin Islands, can partake of. I look forward to us coming together again and resolving these issues."

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