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St. Croix Town Hall Tackles Crime Concerns, Community Solutions, and Law Enforcement Gaps

A WTJX-led town hall meeting in Frederiksted addressed crime prevention, challenges with witness cooperation, need for youth discipline, traffic law enforcement, and VIPD recruitment as officials encouraged public support and involvement.

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Police Commissioner Mario Brooks addressed the St. Croix community on Tuesday night at the Rotary West building. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

On Tuesday, St. Croix residents gathered in Frederiksted for a frank and open discourse with law enforcement and government officials on the state of crime on the Big Island. The wide-ranging discussion covered a number of topics, including approaches to crime prevention, challenges with

obtaining witness testimony, traffic enforcement, and community involvement. The town hall meeting was convened by local PBS affiliate WTJX, in conjunction with the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety.

Police Commissioner Mario Brooks noted that the overwhelming majority of crime in the territory is being perpetrated by a minuscule fraction of the population. "It's like two to three percent of our community that's doing this nonsense consistently," he said, exhorting community members to refuse to accommodate lawlessness within their ranks.

Mr. Brooks recounted his mother imposing a strict curfew on him as a child, and said "we have to get back to that as a community," to ensure that discipline is instilled in children from a young age. "Stop being a friend, be a parent."

He also noted that sometimes, effective policing is hampered when family members of suspects harbor them from police, or when victims of crimes are reluctant to co-operate or assist in prosecuting offenders. "If we want the problem to stop, we have to come together. We have to today."

One of the attendees, however, noted on many occasions, behavioral problems in young people stem from a history of abuse. "Some of our kids are really hurting," she said, arguing that the community needs to stop covering up such incidents and start ensuring that crimes of this nature are reported, and children protected.

While acknowledging the need for increased vigilance by parents and caregivers, and cooperation with law enforcement by the wider community, many attendees articulated the chilling effect the fear of retaliatory violence has on their willingness to come forward.

"Who's going to protect me when I testify?" one woman asked. "I know people that...got shot at when they came out of the courtroom." She advocated for more robust witness protection programs as a means of quelling that fear and encouraging people to come forward with information that would help police and prosecutors put offenders behind bars.

Mr. Brooks acknowledged that concern, and disclosed that relocating people who are in potential danger as a result of providing information to law enforcement is something that happens. However, "we're not going to advertise that," he said, suggesting that highlighting operational details such as this may not be the best course of action from a law enforcement perspective.

Several people expressed the view that improving discipline among the wider community when it comes to minor matters, and increasing respect for law enforcement officials, were crucial first steps in addressing the larger problem of violent crime.

One of the early speakers at the forum was concerned about the public's attitude towards police officers. He recounted observing a traffic stop and being taken aback at the way in which the individual under scrutiny was speaking to the police officers that had stopped them. He urged officers to politely insist on being addressed appropriately. "To have somebody disrespecting officers like that on the street, it hurts both sides," the concerned citizen said.

Increasing the level of compliance with basic laws and regulations – governing speed limits, noise limits, and the like – was also a topic of discussion. Increasing fines for traffic violations will be the subject of an upcoming Senate hearing, attendees were told. According to Mr. Brooks, further amendments to existing laws were not particularly necessary; the VIPD just needed to commit to enforce the ones currently on the books. "That is something we are working on," he assured. "Of

course, we can't be everywhere, but regardless, when we see it, it needs to be addressed.”

Manpower, Commissioner Brooks admitted, was a challenge for the VIPD. Recruitment efforts have been ramped up in a bid to address the issue, he said. “We are taking a whole new dynamic when it comes to strategy, when it comes to recruiting,” Mr. Brooks said.

Several people at the town hall meeting expressed willingness to assist the police however they could. They were encouraged to sign up as a [community volunteer on the VIPD website](#), after which they would be contacted with further instructions.

Overall, the consensus among officials and the public was that the community needs to place more emphasis on ensuring that the current generation of children is safeguarded from the factors that encourage anti-social behavior, in a bid to extinguish the growing problem with crime. Simultaneously, however, attention must be paid to the successful arrest, prosecution and conviction of the current crop of perpetrators in order to bring relief to the beleaguered community.

A second town hall meeting will be held on Wednesday evening. It begins at 5 p.m. at the Florence A. Williams Library in Christiansted.

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