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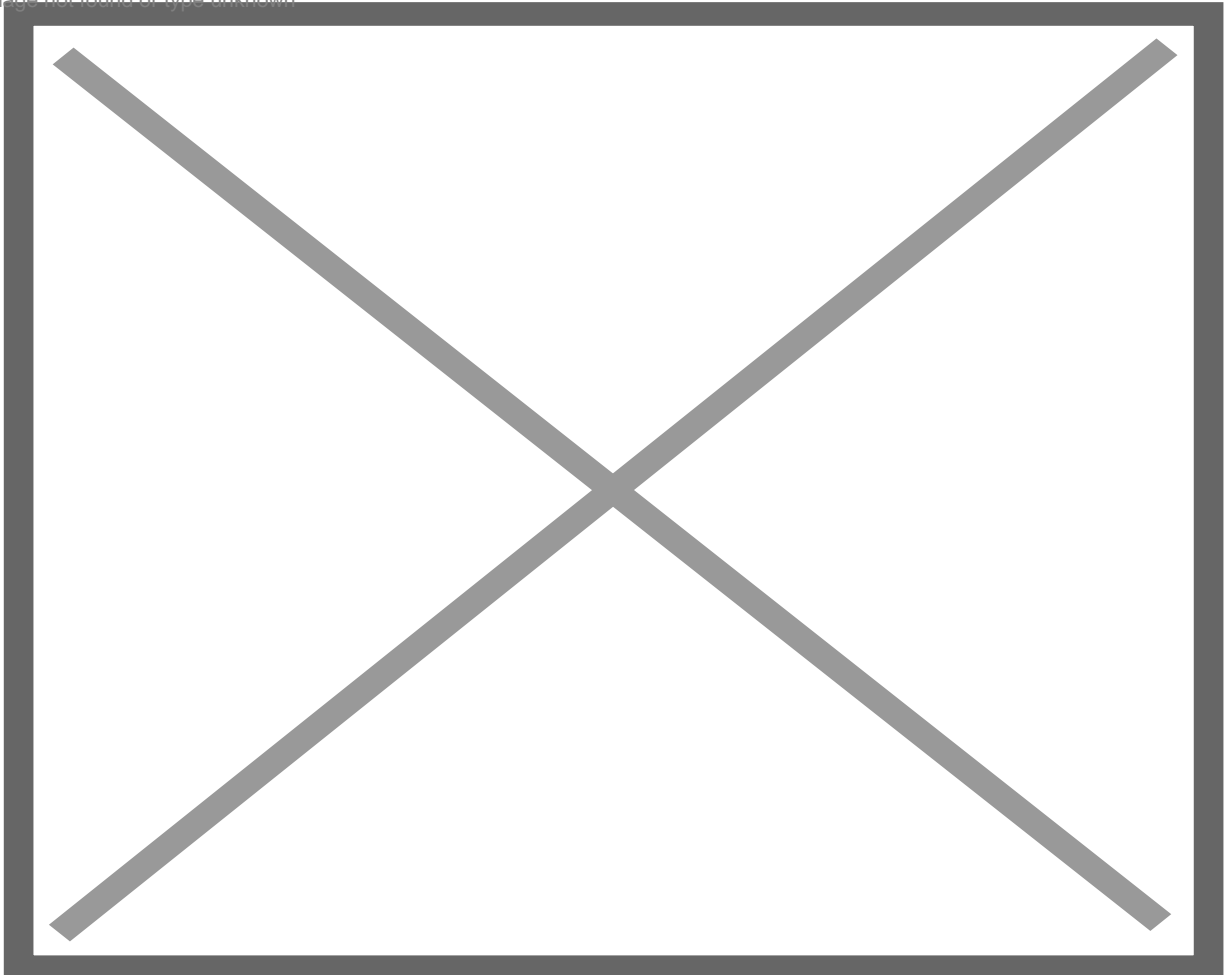
After 54 Years in the Making, V.I. Land and Water Use Plan Faces Funding Challenges in First Year of Implementation

With its 10-year Land and Water Use Plan barely six months into implementation, DPNR is struggling to secure funds, facing cuts to FEMA's BRIC grants and NOAA support, while pressing for local staffing and zoning reforms to keep the plan on track.

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Aerial view of Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, USVI in May 2025. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

Five months after the territory's Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan was adopted during the 35th Legislature's final session, the conversation has now turned to its implementation. Some 54

years in the making, the Plan is a nearly [200-page document](#) that outlines goals, policies, and strategies to effectively manage the territory's land and water resources.

On Thursday, Jean-Pierre Oriol, commissioner in the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources, appeared before the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Planning, and Infrastructure to provide a status update. "Our two main focuses have been on implementation and seeking funding for the implementation," said Mr. Oriol. But while DPNR continues its inter-agency efforts toward implementation, projects and programs cost money and funds are growing increasingly difficult to come by.

"The Building Resilient Infrastructure in Communities, or BRIC, funding opportunities under FEMA has been ceased," shared Mr. Oriol. Worsening the challenge, "the Big, Beautiful Bill proposes a \$646 million cut to the FEMA non-disaster grant programs." Additionally, "many NOAA-funded planning grants have also been cut, limiting our opportunities for federal resource support," the DPNR commissioner disclosed.

Limited funding opportunities have led DPNR to turn to the V.I. Housing Finance Authority for assistance. "They have monies in their CDBG MIT program earmarked for planning projects," he noted. DPNR is in the process of "making our case for support from this program." If successful, these funds will be used for the staffing "necessary to pursue implementation."

The Comp Plan – Mr. Oriol's preferred verbiage – is expected to be fully implemented in 10 years. Nearly into the halfway mark of the first year, DPNR is focused on staffing. Hiring an implementation coordinator at an estimated \$80,000 annual salary is crucial. DPNR also intends to contract legal support to assist in key revisions to Title 29, Chapter 3 of the Virgin Islands Code, relevant to zoning and subdivision.

Amendments are expected to "reduce the number of rezonings that we're getting," explained Territorial Planner Leia LaPlace-Matthew. "That's one of the priority areas that we want to tackle." Initial reviews of the table of permitted uses began a decade ago and will continue as part of the Comp Plan. "We think that making it more flexible is something that the community wanted," added Mr. Oriol. Revisions will include amending fines for non-compliance.

Despite being described as low-hanging fruit, reduced funding raised the eyebrows of most lawmakers. Senator Angel Bolques was curious about strategies to ensure the plan "does not stall in year one." Though federal funding is waning, "it does not mean that there aren't opportunities," Mr. Oriol countered. He assured the at-large senator that DPNR is "being very aggressive in looking." He remains optimistic that the CDBG-MIT funding managed by VIHFA will come through. It would enable DPNR to "attack the things that align more closely in the early going."

Turning to the bigger picture, Senator Milton Potter was interested in the "total estimated cost for implementing this Comp Plan over the next 10 years." It's a figure that DPNR's consultants say is "difficult" to approximate. "To develop cost for all of the other built infrastructure things, particularly when we're talking about theories on change, they said that that is a difficult thing for us to quantify," he explained. "It's just such a large, broad and abstract thing that it's hard to put a dollar figure on them."

DPNR, like many other local government departments, is closely monitoring presidential decisions that are bound to impact how much federal funding is available for the territory. "They don't know what the Senate markup will look like," said Mr. Oriol. "One of the things that the Trump administration is pushing is for the FY25 appropriation to match what he's requesting in an

FY26 appropriation, which would mean...it would lower that amount by almost a trillion dollars in spending.” DPNR does not know where cuts may be made.

“You have to wait until the full budget is actually out for us to know that, but we are tracking very, very closely,” the commissioner told lawmakers. If sufficient funds are not secured in the first year, he told Senator Potter, the Comp Plan “adjusts.”

Notwithstanding, provisions have been made in the local budget to cover at least one position specific to the implementation of the Comp Plan.

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