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Rezoning for \$66 Million St. Thomas Housing Project Moves Forward Despite Opposition

Lawmakers approved Bill 36-0128 to rezone VIPA land in Lindberg Bay for a \$66 million, 126-unit housing project by The Benoit Group, despite objections from three STX senators who cited unresolved issues with VIHFA, funding questions, and flood concerns.

Development / **Published On October 31, 2025 06:08 AM /**

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A rezoning proposal that would pave the way for a 126-unit affordable and middle-income housing development in Lindberg Bay advanced this week despite three senators voting against it. Lawmakers Marise James, Clifford Joseph, and Franklin Johnson each opposed the measure for different reasons, though it still garnered enough support to pass.

Bill 36-0128, first heard during Wednesday's Committee on the Whole, seeks to rezone Parcel No. 68A Estate Lindberg Bay, No. 4A Southside Quarter from Public (P) to Residential-Medium Density (R-3). The Virgin Islands Port Authority owns the land and has entered a 40-year lease with The Benoit Group, which plans to build a long-term rental complex expected to cost \$66 million.

According to Leia LaPlace-Matthew of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, the project envisions one to two buildings, each three to four stories tall, housing 78 one-bedroom and 48 two-bedroom units, along with at least 126 parking spaces.

Public feedback was mixed. Four nearby property owners raised concerns—three in opposition—and five additional letters submitted after the hearing questioned the project's scope and funding, some alleging potential "misuse of public funds."

Developers Torian Priestly and Attorney Clive Rivers told lawmakers that financing would combine about \$15 million in traditional loans with \$49 million in Community Development Block Grant Mitigation and Disaster Recovery Funds administered by the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority (VIHFA).

When asked about contingency plans if VIHFA denies the application, Priestly said the team would pursue infrastructure and demolition grants or other federal funding sources, similar to previous projects the firm has managed on the U.S. mainland.

For Senator Marise James, however, VIHFA's role was a sticking point. She referenced the unresolved conditions of LBJ Gardens on St. Croix, which falls under VIHFA's authority. "I want to see that taken care of before I vote on anything that has to do with Mr. Eugene Jones of the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority," she said. Her "protest vote," she explained, was rooted in principle.

"First things first, the LBJ residents on the island of St. Croix need to be addressed... before the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority considers this application for CDBG mitigation funds," she reiterated on the Senate floor Thursday.

While several senators sympathized with her concerns, most emphasized the territory's urgent housing crisis. "We must find a way to assist them also," said Senator Marvin Blyden, adding that he plans to meet with VIHFA's director about the St. Croix matter. "But let's not confuse the two."

Senate President Milton Potter agreed, calling the bill "an opportunity for us to have a number of units transform an area right now that is in bad shape."

Senator Clifford Joseph, by contrast, said he could not "in clear conscience" support the measure, citing "too many unanswered questions." He questioned whether the \$66 million cost was realistic. Senator Franklin Johnson also expressed doubts about flooding risks in low-lying areas but did not elaborate further.

Despite the dissent, ten of thirteen senators voted in favor, sending the measure to Governor Albert Bryan Jr. for final consideration.