

Bryan Proposes Voter Referendum on New Taxes to Fund Hospitals and Road Maintenance

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. on Monday urged lawmakers to let voters decide whether to approve two 1% income taxes dedicated to healthcare and road maintenance, arguing federal recovery funds will not sustain long-term infrastructure needs.

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The Juan F. Luis Hospital on St. Croix, which would benefit from the proposed 1% income tax dedicated to healthcare funding. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

Will Virgin Islanders be willing to pay more taxes as a means of investing in the future of the territory's healthcare and infrastructure? Governor Albert Bryan Jr. hopes so. However, it's a decision that he wants to place directly into the hands of voting taxpayers.

On Monday, Governor Bryan presented his final State of the Territory Address, which focused in part on rebuilding hurricane-damaged healthcare facilities and hardening important public infrastructure.

Currently, a massive injection of federal recovery funds is enabling the Virgin Islands to simultaneously manage dozens of capital projects. The territory's leaders know that it's not an arrangement that will last forever.

"If we want hospitals that truly meet modern standards and roads that are properly maintained, we cannot rely on federal support alone," Governor Bryan said.

He added that "at some point, we as Virgin Islanders must decide together what level of service we want and what we are willing to invest to get it."

Now, the territory's leader is asking the Legislature to "consider placing a simple question before voters at the next election." That question is captured within Governor Bryan's proposal of the "Private Citizen Initiative."

Mr. Bryan wants the voting public to decide "whether to dedicate a small, targeted share of our own income toward priorities that touch every life in these islands." Specifically, voters would be asked "whether they support a 1% income tax dedicated solely to our hospitals to help fund a basic level of universal insurance so that no Virgin Islander is left without essential care."

Further, he wants voters to share their stance on a "1% income tax dedicated strictly to maintaining local roads for 15 years, and then it's done, with the option to support maintenance of private roads that connect our neighborhoods and communities."

He clarified that "this is not a decision for one governor or one Legislature." Instead, he qualified it as "a choice about our shared future."

If voters approve Mr. Bryan's proposed referendum questions, the funds would be "locked in for these purposes, not to grow government for its own sake but to guarantee that our hospitals are open, staffed, and modern."

Governor Bryan's proposal bears some resemblance to a Health and Security Levy implemented by the Government of Saint Lucia. In that arrangement, a levy of 2.5% is imposed on all taxable invoices for goods and services. The collected funds benefit healthcare and citizen security. That tax however was an imposition of the government, not voted on directly by the populace.

If the Legislature considers Governor Bryan's request, it will be one more choices placed in the hands of voters when they go to the ballot box in November.