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Bryan Says Gov't Needs Long-Term Building Strategy as PFA Approves New Office Leases

Governor Bryan said rising rents, limited vacancies and the relocation of agencies during rebuilding efforts are straining the government's office options, even as officials pursue temporary leases to house growing PFA and ODR operations on St. Thomas.

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The V.I. Public Finance Authority on Wednesday approved new office leases for both PFA and the Office of Disaster Recovery, while Governor Albert Bryan Jr. said the government needs to move toward owning more of its office space instead of continuing to rely so heavily on rental arrangements.

The discussion began with board approval of a three-year lease agreement with the West Indian Company for office space at Warehouse K on Parcel 6BF Estate Thomas for PFA operations.

Officials said the lease would cover about 4,780 square feet at an annual cost of \$143,400, for a total three-year obligation of \$430,200.

PFA officials said the authority needs additional room to support expanding operations, anticipated personnel growth and added responsibilities tied to the corporation's evolving portfolio. During the discussion, officials said the new space is expected to house functions including accounting, human resources and information technology.

Questions from the board focused on cost and whether other sites had been considered. Governor Bryan said the rent was actually low by St. Thomas commercial standards and that there are few options available because government offices and other agencies are already being moved around as facilities are rebuilt or reconfigured.

He said he had to intervene to help secure the space because "there's nowhere to go."

Board discussion also turned to whether the government should continue leasing scattered office space long term. Governor Bryan said one reason the PFA lease is only for three years is that the administration is hopeful it can acquire what he described as the nurses building adjacent to PFA's current complex, demolish what is there and construct a new building that could eventually house government staff in owned space instead of rented offices.

He also said the administration has looked at other possible acquisitions, including Hamilton House, and noted that the old Processor building is currently for sale, though he said PFA does not have the money for that purchase and that parking would also be an issue.

The board then approved a separate lease tied to ODR, authorizing the executive director or director of finance and administration on behalf of the Office of Disaster Recovery to execute a three-year lease with Banco Popular for office space at 193 Altona on St. Thomas.

Williams-Octalien said ODR had previously looked at other space, including locations in Crown Bay and Nisky, but those options could not accommodate the office's staffing needs. She said many ODR workers have been operating from home for months after the building they occupied at Belgium was purchased by Benton Construction.

She told the board the Altona site offers about 7,811 square feet and can house at least 50 to 60 staff members, with some additional room for growth. She said Banco Popular had relocated a segment of its own staff out of the area, making the space available.

The annual cost for that lease was presented as \$320,255.10. Williams-Octalien said the location is fully furnished, which would reduce additional costs because furniture from the prior ODR space can also be reused.

The lease approvals prompted further discussion about government-owned property more broadly. Bryan said the government already had a transparency website showing its building inventory, leases, square footage and related details, but said the site is currently down due to a vendor dispute. He said he would follow up on getting it restored because it is useful when officials are trying to identify available properties.

