The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bryan Says VI Will ‘Never Catch Up’ on Road Repairs Without New Revenue, Pushes Road Tax Referendum, Property Reassessments, Vacation Rental Taxes, and Possible Waste Fees

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. says the Virgin Islands cannot keep up with road repairs without more money, as his administration also pursues property reassessments, broader vacation rental tax collection, and possible residential waste fees.

Government / **Published On March 21, 2026 10:58 AM /**

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When Governor Albert Bryan Jr. presented his final State of the Territory Address in January, he proposed a small income tax increase to fund road repairs and basic universal health insurance. As increasing taxes have never been favorably regarded by the population, Governor Bryan asked that his proposal be put to a referendum.

Since then, there has been little to no mention of that proposal, and consequently, no action.

Governor Bryan broached the matter once more during Friday's Revenue Estimating Conference. "We have sent down two items for referendum. We haven't heard anything about it," he said, addressing the legislators present. Among them was Senator Novelle Francis, chair of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance.

Governor Bryan focused on the proposed 1% income tax increase for road repairs. The collected revenue would be used to pave public and private roads not covered by federal recovery funds. "I say this because we will never catch up on road paving," he lamented.

"Let's put it to the people. If the people say no, they don't want to pay 1% to make sure the roads are kept well, we have a statement from the will of the people," Governor Bryan said. "I just urge the Legislature to just put a referendum on a ballot. Let the people decide."

None of the lawmakers present on Friday responded then.

The proposed tax increase isn't the only avenue being explored by the government to raise more money.

The Tax Collector's Office, for one, wants funding to hire approximately 25 more employees to undertake the reassessment of properties across the territory.

"We need to do the property tax reevaluation," Governor Bryan insisted. He noted that while construction costs have skyrocketed, the valuation of homes "has been the same for the last 15 years now. We need to start to reassess everybody."

The governor knows that this may not blow over well. "Nobody like to hear this, but the government need money."

He promised that any increases would occur "slowly", as annual increases cannot surpass 10%. "Eventually, I think we going to generate at least 30% more income from land taxes, because your house was evaluated when you build it 15 years ago," he said.

The government is also hoping to collect room taxes on vacation rentals outside of the traditional hotel rooms. While an arrangement has been struck with Airbnb, other platforms do not remit taxes to the government. According to Governor Bryan, the Attorney General is currently working on filling that gap. "That's a massive amount of money that we're leaking out there," the governor stated.

The Waste Management Authority, meanwhile, is working with a firm to evaluate what cost should be attached to house-to-house solid waste collection. According to Chief Financial Officer Daryl Griffith, a report should be submitted "by next week." The proposed cost will then be presented to the governor and subsequently, the Public Services Commission.

For its part, the Economic Development Authority is working to attract more investors and consequently, more taxes. “Our goal is to bring beneficiaries here [so] that we get at least another $5 million in taxes paid into the Treasury,” said chief executive officer Wayne Biggs.

The director of the Office of Management and Budget, Julio Rhymer, has indicated that revenue collection is not necessarily the territory’s issue, but rather how much unplanned expenditure accumulates over several years.