

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Quality of Life Seen as Key to Virgin Islands Growth and Diaspora Return

Lawmakers and agency officials said economic diversification and a coming construction boom will not be enough on their own, arguing that healthcare, housing, education, infrastructure, utilities and pay will shape growth and diaspora return.

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As the territory prepares for a surge of federally funded recovery construction and the possibility of broader economic diversification, officials say one issue will heavily influence whether that growth can be sustained and whether Virgin Islanders living away from home will choose to return: quality of life.

During Friday's meeting of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, lawmakers and agency officials repeatedly emphasized that economic opportunity alone will not be enough. Reliable healthcare, education, housing, infrastructure, utilities, and compensation were all described as essential to attracting investment, retaining skilled workers, and encouraging members of the diaspora to come back.

A massive injection of federal funds and dozens of recovery construction projects in the pipeline have generated excitement, as the territory's leaders anticipate major economic growth and opportunities for diversification.

Alongside the pending construction boom, the central government appears focused on economic diversification, attracting additional investments, creating new and innovative job opportunities, and encouraging Virgin Islanders in the diaspora to return home. But leaders acknowledged that attracting people who migrated to the mainland and elsewhere for greater opportunities will not be simple.

The need to develop and maintain quality services for residents and those who may return home was a central theme during Friday's meeting of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture.

Senator Novelle Francis was among those to underscore that point, saying that the discussion about the territory's wide range of plans could not happen "without the quality of life issues." He pointed to the need for "proper health care" as well as reliable public infrastructure and education. For Senator Francis, those are necessary conditions for attracting people to "come back home or actually relocate here to be able to do business."

Vision 2040, the territory's 20-year economic strategic plan, is intended to guide sustainable economic growth through 2040. According to Wayne Biggs, chief executive officer of the Economic Development Authority, "the plan articulates a vision that puts quality of place and quality of life front and center."

While quality of life is subjective and can vary from person to person, Mr. Biggs said quality of place is a broader concept that captures the basic conditions needed to support a contented society.

Quality of place, he said, includes many of the same concerns raised by Senator Francis.

According to Mr. Biggs, a good quality of life depends on "making sure we have correct health care...educational system...the infrastructure; so our sewage running, our water is okay...stable and reliable power...good internet." The Virgin Islands continues to struggle with several of those baseline indicators, with the power crisis standing out as a clear example.

"And to me, quality of place will...assist in creating a quality of life that everybody is looking for," Mr. Biggs stated.

Haldane Davies, director of the Bureau of Economic Research, agreed with the overall sentiment, noting that "people tend to look at the opportunities that are meaningful for them."

Dr. Davies said he has spoken with a number of people interested in returning home, but who also want the same quality of opportunities available outside the territory.

In addition to the concerns raised by Senator Francis and Mr. Biggs, Dr. Davies said the diaspora is also interested in “being able to be compensated at a certain level that will keep their way of living quite stable.”

Bernesha Liburd of the Bureau of Economic Research said sustainable housing is another key issue, warning that it is “extremely important to retain skilled workers in our community, especially younger skilled workers.” The need for skilled labor has already emerged as one of the challenges tied to the many construction projects moving through the pipeline.

Ms. Liburd also noted that while “diversification of our economy is extremely important,” the territory needs the population base to support that expansion.

“We should start with retaining upskilling locally and making sure that we take care of our people at home first, before we start going abroad, trying to bring in new talent and new skill sets,” she advised.

It was a view that Senator Francis described as “excellent.”