

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Major Effort To Rebrand And Expand Agriculture In V.I. Brings Stakeholders Together

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ST. CROIX -- Department of Agriculture Commissioner Carlos Robles, calling over two dozen local farmers to the front of a small bandstand located in the rear sitting area of Balter Restaurant in Christiansted on Monday night, joked that it was not an often sight to see them dressed elegantly; they're mostly on their farms nurturing produce that so many depend on. But for last night's D.O.A. and Department of Education-sponsored open house at Balter -- deemed a small but important step in transforming the agriculture industry in the territory -- an indelible part of the mission was networking between key stakeholders, whose discussions and mingling, organizers hoped, would forge relationships beneficial to the expansion of the agriculture sector.

The event, dubbed "One Small Step", which was part of D.O.A. and the D.O.E.'s Farm to School month of events, brought together farmers, wholesalers, grocery stores, restaurants and government entities that offer feeding services, said Sommer Sibilly-Brown, Farm to School liason and member of the Good Food Coalition, which helped organize the open house.

And while organizers dubbed the open house a small step in the grander scheme of transforming the way Virgin Islanders see agriculture, farmers The Consortium spoke with at the event were pleased with what they heard from D.O.A. and D.O.E. officials, and agreed that if the words were to turn into action, and there's already been a considerable amount of action relative to the Farm to School effort, the result would be a sea change for the local agriculture industry, whose rise would mean more local produce more dollars circulating in the local economy.



Agriculture Commissioner Carlos Robles and

Sommer Sibilly-Brown interact at open house event. (Credit: [Chalana Brown](#))

"This is what we've been asking for for years," said Yvette Browne of [Sejah Farms of the Virgin Islands](#). "I think everything takes time, everything has a process, but we're getting there and this in and of itself is a big step forward. This connection between farmers, the institutions, the restaurants and all the agencies can cause the effect of change."

Mr. Robles thanked the farmers for attending, and stated that one of his goals as commissioner was to make sure that new markets were identified for farmers. "This is just one of them and we have several others with the WIC program [Women Infants and Children]; there's another one that we're eyeing with the senior citizens program, along with the SNAP program [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also called Food Stamps], which is approximately \$56.5 million coming into the territory in SNAP benefits," Mr. Robles said.

New Breed Farm co-owner Bobby Peets, whose produce such as watermelons, seasoned peppers and cucumbers have been purchased by the Department of Education as part of the Farm to School initiative, lauded the open house as a big step forward.

"I think this is a real big step for agriculture in the Virgin Islands, and it will move every farm forward," Mr. Peets said. He added that the networking served as an equal opportunity provider, allowing farm owners to interact with potential partners who buy and sell produce.

Assistant D.O.E. Commissioner Chermaine Hobson-Johnson stressed the health benefits of the initiative, and the partnership between D.O.A. and D.O.E. as a marriage that was bound to happen.

"We are tired of eating food from the mainland and wherever, and not supporting our own. It's time that we start the process," she said to applause. Mrs. Hobson-Johnson said D.O.E. has been extremely pleased with the partnership, calling it a "seamless" alliance between D.O.A. and D.O.E., and went on to describe some produce that she tasted at a Farm to School event held at Claude O. Markoe Elementary School, as scrumptious.

"I can't wait until we get to the stage when we're actually preparing the food with our own seasoning," she said.

President of the 31st Legislature, Neville James, noted the benefits of growing local as cost beneficial and also as favorable to the health of residents. "A sound St. Croix economy starts with a healthy agriculture industry, and the relationship with the Department of Education that will provide that leadership and education," he said. Mr. James also encouraged farmers who may not be versed on the business side of their venture, not to be intimidated by the paperwork that comes with being a business owner. He urged farmers having such issues to reach out for help, and implored them to get their children involved in the management of their farms.

The open house was a well attended affair, and featured music from Stanley and the Ten Sleepless Knights. After speeches from local officials, the mingling began in earnest, and stakeholders, as was the organizers' mission, interacted with each other, discussing partnership opportunities among other possibilities.

Some of the big players represented at the event included Plaza Extra East, Plaza Extra West, Merchant's Market, the University of the Virgin Islands, and U.V.I.'s Cooperative Extension Service. Organizers included the Good Food Coalition of the Virgin Islands, D.O.A. and D.O.E.

Feature Image: St. Croix farmers at open house event at Balter Restaurant. (Credit: [Chalana Brown](#))