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Aquaponics Center on St. Croix Hopes to Revitalize Agriculture in Territory

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Reverend Dr. Lee, Senator DeGazon, and Governor Bryan at ground breaking on Friday at the Estate Bethlehem property that will be home to the aquaponics center By. KIA GRIFFITH FOR VI CONSORTIUM

ST. CROIX — At a ground-breaking ceremony late Friday morning in the historic Estate Bethlehem adjacent to the National Guard's compound on St. Croix, Governor Albert Bryan unveiled the details of the FreshMinistries Aquaponics Center, a \$2.5 million funded venture that aims to revitalize agriculture, encourage tourism, provide training, and generate sustainable production towards multi-level economic development.

“You don’t need agricultural land in order to do aquaponics,” said Mr. Bryan. Growing crops through aquaponics uses less than 5 percent of water required in traditional soil-based farming and nutrients from tilapia waste.

The aquaponics center will have enclosed greenhouses that make efficient use of energy and cisterns that can cumulatively store over 1 million gallons of water. Since aquaponics is a system that loses very little water to evaporation, conservation is to be expected.

Given the conditions of an aquaponics system, “you can grow exponentially more,” relayed Reverend Dr. Robert Lee III, founder and CEO of FreshMinistries in Jacksonville, Florida.

The governor described the Jacksonville facility as a tourism product, when he said, “People want to come and see these things being grown. They want to see the fish, and people like fresh food.”

Aquaponics is not a labor-intensive type of farming. According to Mr. Bryan, this center will be designed to train children of all ages, with the hopes that it will be most attractive to young children who are learning about science.

“We have to engage the Department of Labor to find young individuals who are interested in doing this,” Mr. Bryan acknowledged as a future step to reach trainees.

Making a direct link between training and sustainability, Dept. of Agriculture Assistant Commissioner Diana Collingwood, stated, “When you partner these initiatives with a training program, it tells you that people will be trained to continue the initiative.”

“The intention is to create an actual incubator of many of these farms on one property where you can get the savings from the solar that’s being generated and allow you to make even a greater profit as you pay back in to the co-op,” Mr. Bryan said. The sustainability of this venture will then make it possible for farmers in the territory to develop their own aquaponics farms, using the FreshMinistries Aquaponics Center as a model, the governor said.

“As it pertains to agriculture, we changed course,” said Senator Allison DeGazon, channeling Governor Bryan's 2018 campaign slogan. She told a parable of how agriculture, like a woman, lost her “sexy” through a decline from the government to the backyards of Virgin Islanders, but is steadily bringing it back with UVI’s recently approved School of Agriculture and other agriculture-related bills and programs that her office is sponsoring.

This initiative was seven years in the making with collaboration between Mr. Lee, Mr. Bryan, and Ms. DeGazon, all of whom were certified as aquaponics instructors at UVI. It is a joint venture between St. Croix Farmers in Action, Inc., FreshMinistries, and The Episcopal Diocese of the Virgin Islands.

Funding came from a 2015 grant investment from the U.S. Economic Development Administration amounting to nearly \$2 million and another half a million contribution from Mr. Lee himself.