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Senator Blyden Wants to Extend Temporary Stay on Tenant Evictions Beyond July 27

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Senator Marvin Blyden, who chairs the Committee on Housing, Transportation, Infrastructure and Development, on Wednesday expressed "deep concern" about what he termed a "premature" expiration of tenant eviction protections, and said he was taking legislative action to bring relief to renters in the territory.

In his release, Mr. Blyden explained that on March 23, the Emergency Executive Order issued by Governor Bryan suspended the provisions of law that allow for eviction of tenants. This provided relief for those whose incomes have been impacted by the pandemic and who were worried about whether this crisis would leave them homeless. However, on July 1st the governor issued another order declaring that the eviction protections will expire on July 27, 2020, which Mr. Blyden said left thousands of Virgin Islanders in danger of losing their residences. "This is of deep concern to

me as a Virgin Islander, as a public official and as an advocate for affordable housing,” he said.

The senator said the decision to end the stay on tenant evictions was not a product decision, because Covid-19 cases in the USVI were rising, the economy and jobs are still sharply down, and thousands of residents have not yet received promised federal COVID-19 assistance.

“Has everyone received their economic stimulus checks?” asked Mr. Blyden. “Have all unemployed and self-employed workers received the benefits they are due? Are cruise ships in the harbor? In the absence of these things how can we, as public servants, choose to let these critical protections expire and leave people homeless?”

Mr. Blyden noted that the federal stay on evictions also expires on July 27th but said there is no reason the territory cannot extend its own moratorium past that date. “There are at least twelve states, including New York, Florida, California, and New Jersey, which have moratoriums that extend past the federal deadline, or that will not end until the expiration of that state’s public health emergency,” he said. “The Virgin Islands needs to do the same.”

But what about the landlords?

Mr. Blyden said an extended moratorium will not place homeowners at risk, since the federal C.A.R.E.S. Act provides that homeowners with federally-backed mortgages can request mortgage forbearance for up to 360 days if they are experiencing financial hardship as a result of the pandemic. “These means,” said Mr. Blyden, “that people who have mortgages backed by Freddie or Fannie Mac, or any federally-backed home loan program, can have their mortgage payments reduced or suspended for nearly a year. Certainly, our tenants need similar protections.”

The Housing Committee chairman said eviction notices are already going out and that there is need for immediate action. “My constituents are already coming to me, with notices in hand, expressing deep concern and fear about being able to remain in their homes. We cannot stand by silently and allow such a situation to continue,” the senator said, adding that if necessary, he will offer a measure in the next Legislative Session.

“I call on the governor to rethink this matter and to immediately extend the moratorium on tenant evictions until the end of the year,” the Democratic majority leader said. “I have already submitted a drafting request to this effect, but I hope that the Governor, who can address this matter with the stroke of a pen, will see the wisdom and the humanity in making sure that people are not made homeless during this crisis.”

Mr. Blyden concluded by noting that the need for extended tenant protections is highlighted by the governor's recent announcement, which established additional travel restrictions, delayed school re-openings until at least September, and raised the possibility of continued remote learning. “How will students attend school from home if they have no home?” the senator asked.