

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Op-Ed | This Year's State of the Territory Address Requires An Acute Level Of Focus

Opinion / **Published On January 22, 2018 01:32 PM /**

Staff **January 22, 2018**



There is something unattractive about progress and change in the Virgin Islands. And by change, I don't mean bigger buildings, more roads, less trees or even more pervasive technological advancements. Instead, I mean better buildings, more efficient roads and the embracing of nature and technology into modern architecture.

Our circumstances in the Virgin Islands are utterly unique because of our size and our relationship with the United States.

In 2015, I returned to the Virgin Islands after pursuing a degree in Secondary Education (English) and a career with the United States Marine Corps. I had been living away for

about 4 years. Living and serving in the Armed Services changed the way I viewed the world, and like many of us, a change of that nature can alter how you view the islands that birthed and raised you.

My first few months were filled with bliss and exciting adventures that I never thought I could have in St. Thomas. As the weeks and months passed, I was slowly dealt with harsh and sometimes uncomfortable realities. After months of listening to myself complain, I realized that I was a huge part of the problem; a cog in an intricate social machine, just spinning rather than breaking loose.

Do you talk about economics with family? Do you talk about health care with your coworkers? Do you talk about issues in the community to your Congresswoman, senators, Governor or Lt. Governor? Are you registered to vote?

While it may seem like you are doing the Virgin Islands a favor by ceding your rights to vote, not voting has **never** elected the right candidate. The Virgin Islands that I envision is where the younger populace embraces every available tool to advance their future and better our islands.

Freedom of expression is what makes the internet and social media particularly beautiful, but dismissing the actions of an elected official and masking it with humor can be a dangerous precedent. Humor helps us to cope, but refusing to face issues and major problems head on can usually work against us.

While I do not have data to back up any economic claims, I do believe firmly that the Virgin Islands will see tremendous economic growth and job creation in the next 10 years. Though I do not see the next 3-4 years being explosive as far as growth, I do believe that there are important shifts happening in the Territory that can take us to that golden era of prosperity one day.

It's been almost a year since we began talking about, protesting and actively pushing back on more taxation without representation.

We face a sometimes overwhelming amount of problems here in the territory. I've named three of those problems that can open a new era for the U.S. Virgin Islands if they are addressed properly.

1. The breakdown of government trust and its nearly backwards march to progress:

There are so many things and so many ideas that make the Virgin Islands great and unique in the Caribbean. It might not seem like much, but the online internet/eCommerce community is growing larger and larger by the day. So many locals are creating their own brands and putting it out there for people to purchase their merchandise or services. It is unfortunate that no significant legislation has been passed to make it easier for these businesses to establish themselves or to simply replace our severely outdated tax code so that various branches of government can benefit from the revenues this new market will create.

2. Confidence, bold moves, and imagination will determine the future:

Each day spent deliberating how the Virgin Islands will re-enter the bond market is not only a waste of time, it creates an image in the region that is unsavory as lawmakers and the Head of State have been unsuccessful in securing any new or significant revenue streams since passing the Sin Tax Bill nearly a year prior to today.

One of the reasons the economy has begun to tank is due to lack of imagination. Seatrade Global in Florida has shown that to be a lingering concern in the cruise industry. Infrastructure is another, but that's a subject of its own. Nobody wants to spend a ton of money to visit and island with a half-baked tourism package. Maive Jackson, a St. Thomas resident in her 20s has made some great points on what tourism should actually look like.

It should be determined by, and the narrative and culture should be directed by the native people. Our culture is not beaches with white sand, Bob Marley commercials and expensive resorts. That is great, but what more can we give to people who are visiting here for the first time? The government plays a part in this narrative, but first it must be set by the people it represents.

Adding local food vans and pop up shops around the Territory to Google Maps can have a dramatic impact on how visitors view and experience these islands. This is where tourists will get the purest version of Virgin Islands culture. We can do that simply by putting our brands online and making them visible to the world.

3. The grip of the Federal government and our status and a U.S. Territory:

This one is perhaps the most important because it is nearly out of our control. As U.S. citizens, U.S. Virgin Islanders are unable to vote or participate in the process of determining who will lead us on a national level. We are ultimately subject to all the rules and laws that are passed, and we are ultimately led by whoever the voting populace picks on the mainland.

Several laws passed by Congress in the past 100 years are responsible for our predicament. For decades, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Guam and other U.S. Territories have endured conditions that almost mirror that of a supreme leader, rather than that of a Democratic Republic. Imagine that all of our disaster relief was hinged on a President that didn't even know the U.S. Virgin Islands was a part of the country he was elected to govern.

Our voices in the Virgin Islands is partially silenced as our Congresswoman and other Congressional leaders from U.S. Territories are barred from voting in most circumstances. We are now faced with the tough choice of accepting this, or actively pushing back on that system. We are not a state, however, we have states like California that are willing to fight for us and fight with us for better representation in the United States.

I'd love to see the current governor or any future governor have annual Gubernatorial Summits for U.S. Territories, where they actively seek to undermine the Federal government's grip on the territories. Elected officials must now move past only engaging one another in Senate Sessions but also engaging elected officials on the national, state, and county levels.

Senators tweeting other senators is the closest we've gotten to an open democracy. Constituents tweeting senators, mayors, governors - that is democracy! It's time for us to break out of the mold. The governor's State of the Territory address will set the tone for 2018 beginning this evening to the end of the year and will be far more interesting than Scot the Feteran. It's important for us to remain focused on the vision we all have for our own lives and the lives of every Virgin Islander. Every decision from this day forward will directly affect Virgin Islanders for months or years to come.

This year's State of the Territory Address requires an acute level of focus; pour yourself a glass of coquito, grab your Scot the Feteran t-shirts and tune in!

Submitted today by: Amziah George, founder of the website [State of the Territory](#).

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