

The Virgin Islands Consortium

USVI Hurricane Recovery And Resilience Task Force Issues Report With 2018 Recommendations

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The U.S. Virgin Islands Hurricane Recovery and Resilience Task Force on Friday released its initial 280-page report to help guide reconstruction and resiliency efforts in the territory in the wake of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. According to a release also issued Friday, the report includes more than 200 recommendations on the USVI's long-term recovery to improve critical infrastructure and public services and make businesses more resilient to future storms and other natural disasters.

In October, Governor Kenneth Mapp called for the task force to perform a qualitative and quantitative assessment of damage sustained from the September hurricanes and to outline risks facing the territory from potential future natural hazards, including risks

brought on by climate change. The group also assessed the hurricane damage and outlined risks facing the USVI from potential future natural hazards looking ahead 30 years, including how those risks may evolve with climate change, according to the release.

The document is currently published for public comment, during which time the community can provide feedback until July 27. The report, as well as the form for public comment, can be accessed [here](#). Hard copies will be available beginning on Tuesday, July 24 on St. John at the St. John Community Foundation and Long Term Recovery Offices Suites 201, 203, 205 at the St. John Marketplace, Third Floor; on St. Croix at Florence A. Williams Public Library; on St. Thomas at Charles W. Turnbull Regional Library; and at the Administrator's Offices on all three islands. The final report will be released in August.

[Here's the initial report.](#)

"I want to ensure that every single one of these initiatives aligns with the values and priorities of our community," said Governor Mapp. "We have an opportunity to rebuild smarter, stronger, and better than ever before and the Task Force has helped provide us with additional tools and insight to do so."

Recommendations

According to the release, the recommendations contained in the report are aimed at improving the long-term security and economic recovery, with a special focus on making the territory's critical infrastructure, homes, and businesses more resilient to future storms and other natural disasters. Topics addressed in the report include the government response to the storms as well as recommendations on energy, climate risks, telecommunications, transportation, water, solid waste and wastewater, housing and buildings, health, vulnerable categories, education, economy, nonprofit, volunteer and philanthropic assistance.

The report contains 218 actionable recommendations, many of which are already in the process of implementation. They generally fall into four major strategies: hardening infrastructure, re-configuring systems, changing governance and regulation, and improving planning, coordination and preparation.

The first strategy calls for hardening and fortifying physical infrastructure that already exists by strengthening buildings, roads, communication towers, power lines, and other facilities against hurricane winds and storm surge. Specifically:

- Bury power lines where feasible and use composite telephone poles otherwise; fortify power plants and substations against storm surge and hurricane damage;
- Strengthen telecom towers against high winds and bury the remaining aerial portions of viNGN network;
- Rebuild seaports, expanding container ports and Red Hook customs clearance;
- Expand and modernize both airport terminals;
- Harden and rehabilitate the existing distribution system, including replacing old pipes, and rebuild schools and hospitals to resist future storms;

- Develop a retrofit housing program for older buildings that were built prior to stronger building codes in 1995.

The second strategy recommends several ways the territory can reconfigure systems and create new ways of delivering critical services while simultaneously adding renewable energy components. Specifically:

- Diversify the energy system by adding 50 megawatts of renewable generation supported by battery storage onto the grid by 2025 (with a 20 megawatt goal in the near-term); make St. John independent of St. Thomas for energy supply;
- Tie critical infrastructure like hospitals and telecom towers into microgrids that can operate independently even if another part of the system fails;
- Set up cloud-based backup for government data and applications;
- Switch to buried fiber cables instead of aerial cables of any sort and install a new public safety communications system;
- Increase options for pedestrians and alternative transit;
- Install roundabouts instead of relying on street lights;
- Conduct a territory-wide drainage study;
- Add redundancies to the wastewater system, eliminate some pump stations, and separate wastewater from stormwater systems;
- Close Bovoni and Anguilla landfills and mandate a territory-wide recycling program;
- Expand water systems to serve isolated communities;
- Introduce electronic health records territory wide.

The third recommendation recommends strengthening governance and regulations, focusing especially on energy and healthcare. Specifically:

- Come up with detailed emergency plans to prepare for extreme events across all categories, focusing especially on backup power generation and coordination of government response;
- Reform the energy power purchasing process, update tariff structures, and improve and clarify system governance;
- Update building codes based on what was learned in the hurricanes;
- Lobby Congress to pass a better Medicaid reimbursement rate with the federal government;
- Reform the system for hospital boards and reconsider creating territorial healthcare exchange.

Finally, the report suggest ways to better plan and prepare for future storms by:

- Install back-up power generation that can function over long periods of time; make sure generators are filled up and maintained;
- Create an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) for the territory as a whole; review agency emergency plans; develop pre-hurricane checklists that agencies have to follow; equip and train government workers to use satellite phones and other emergency technology.

The task force was made up of government agency representatives, local officials and community members, as well as business and environmental experts and thought leaders from around the United States who volunteered their time and contributed to the

recommendations. It was also influenced by public comment, with more than 500 community members who participated in five community meetings across St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas as well as two resilience workshops and many other special interest group meetings focusing on housing and economy, according to the release.

Activities of the task force were funded by a grant from the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands. Clifford Graham, president and CEO of the West Indian Company (WICO), led the Task Force Advisory Group as chairman, along with Task Force CEO Dina Simon, who previously served as a senior advisor to the governor.

“We have worked hard to make the report a community-centered effort and hope that Virgin Islanders continue to be engaged in this rebuilding process,” Mrs. Simon said. “We want to hear your feedback and make sure our recommendations reflect the community’s needs and best practices available to the territory.”