The Virgin Islands Consortium

For Far Too Long Virgin Islanders Have Accepted Mediocrity From Those Seeking Elected Office

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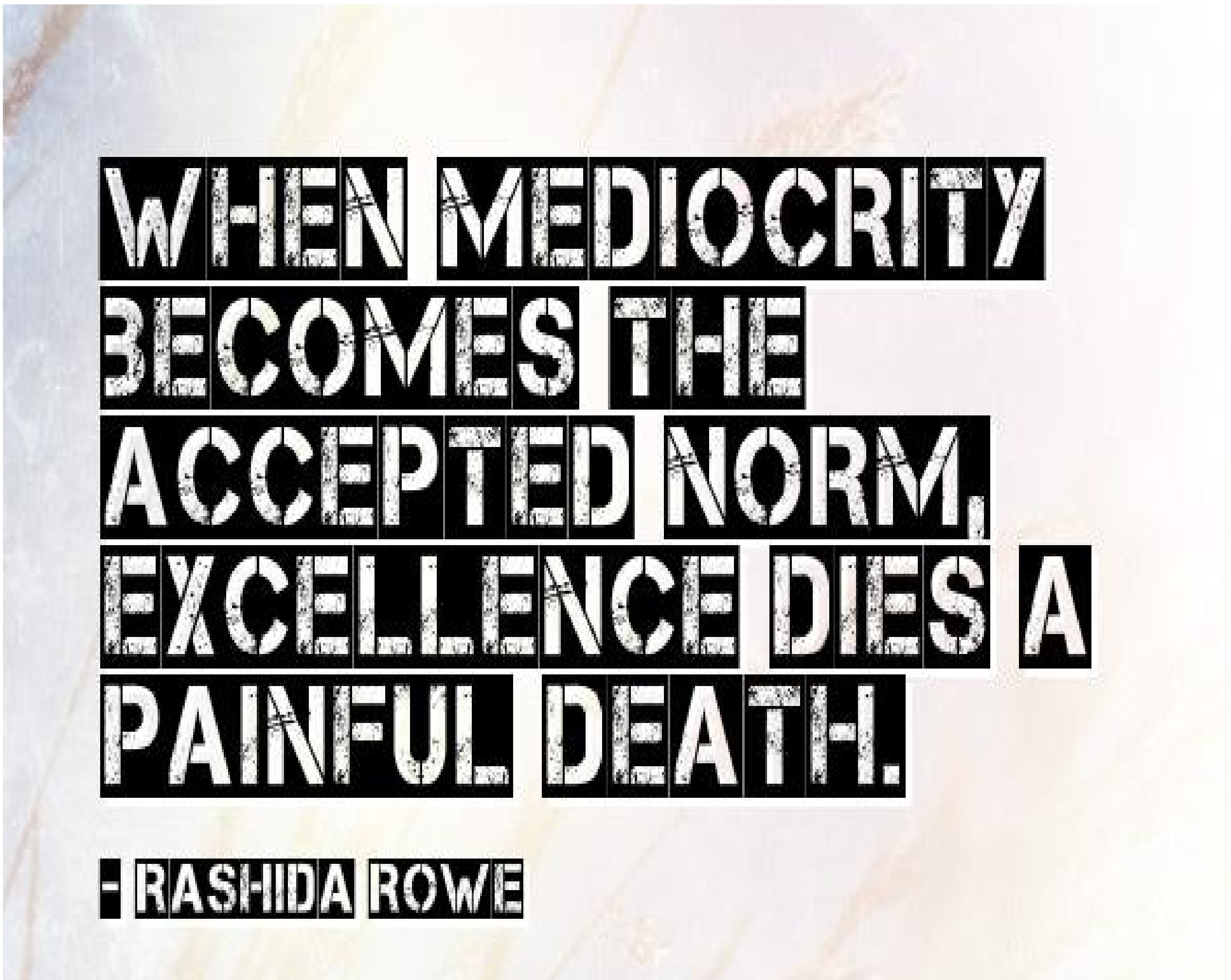

The U.S. Virgin Islands is at a crossroads. If it were not for Hurricanes Irma and Maria, storms which made way for the overflow of federal dollars into the territory, there's no telling how the government would fare financially. Billions of dollars have been pouring in, and the hurricanes cleared the path for community disaster loans to be made available to the government so it could continue day-to-day operations.

Things are looking okay for the moment, but about a year ago the trajectory was unforgiving.

Oh, you don't remember the news before Hurricanes Irma and Maria struck? Allow us to jog your memory: Mapp to Issue Executive Order Authorizing Job Cuts, Furloughs And Other Deep Cuts Throughout Government; As Territory Teeters on the Brink Financial Calamity, Mapp Calls Press Conference; Government Has Two Days Cash On Hand Left, Finance Commissioner Reveals; Mapp Considering Shutting Down Government For One Day Every Two Weeks As Reality Of Financial Crisis Hits.

Those were just some of the headlines that dominated the U.S. Virgin Islands in the early months of 2017, after it was made known that the bond market would no longer lend its money to the territory, fearing the Government of the Virgin Islands (G.V.I.) would not be able to satisfy its covenants.

This happened because for years long before this current administration, the G.V.I. had been borrowing roughly $100 million annually to bridge a structural deficit, and kept growing its debt while providing no new sources of revenue. This frightened bondholders, and with the financial collapse of Puerto Rico forcing the federal government to takeover the commonwealth's finances, the bond market was spooked, believing that the USVI could suffer a similar fate.

So without $100 million in its budget, suddenly the G.V.I. was in emergency mode. The Mapp administration was pushing its five-year recovery plan, which included the Sin Tax bills, even as it looked to austerity measures for more savings. Then, out of the Atlantic Ocean, Hurricanes Irma and Maria walloped the USVI and everything changed.

Yet the federal government won't be throwing money at us forever, and many of the unacceptable conditions in various areas of government have yet to change. In fact, the next few years are critical for the territory, and those who are elected to lead it into the future have some very important and consequential decisions to make.

What will happen to the territory's pension system? If it goes down, according the top three U.S. rating agencies, it would spiral the USVI's economy with it. And our healthcare system is dismal and in post-haste need of overhaul. Who will be at the helm? Both the legislative and executive branches of government. The leaders will have an unrelenting challenge in the coming years in their quest to lift these islands out of stagnation and into economic prosperity for the future of our children.

In the past, residents have voted on the premise of popularity, loud and well executed campaigns, big jams and other tried and true strategies of campaigning. As a result, many of our leaders have struggled to articulate themselves and have brought a lackluster set of bills that have either set us back or kept us in place -- no forward action.

That's why, as the U.S. Virgin Islands, we are somehow behind in economic growth compared to some Caribbean islands. That's why for years the roads we drive on have been inexcusably horrendous; that's why our crime rate, per capita, is among the highest anywhere; and that's why we've seen our brightest leave for better opportunities on the mainland and other countries.

Think about it: Nowhere else is it news that tax refunds are being issued.

Don't take this wrong. We've seen some progress, among them new job opportunities at Limetree Bay, and the recent wage increase spearheaded by the current administration.

But we are at a crossroads here. And the leaders chosen to lead these islands come November 6, will determine the outcome of important pending decisions. Therefore, if you want to be a leader -- senator or a governor -- come with the requisite knowledge and know-how to lead; be learned and experienced in the indispensable fields needed to move us forward. Prepare yourself by studying our economic situation, our healthcare and pension system challenges, and come ready with clear-cut plans that can be understood. Expect to be asked tough and pertinent questions.

And be coherent, too. You are asking to lead us and the territory's $1 billion annual budget. You are asking to be placed in one of the most prestigious places of power in our government. You want our $85,000 annual salary along with countless perks. You want a two-year budget of $800,000. You want to be on the world stage to represent a proud and intelligent people.

No one goes to a job interview unprepared and expect to get the job. On the campaign trail, you are in an interview that lasts until election day on November 6. If you are not learned and you are unprepared, don't expect to get the job. You are not applying for a basic position at McDonald's; you are asking to be part of the leadership that directs the Government of the Virgin Islands, its department and agencies and autonomous and semi-autonomous entities.

If you are unprepared, this is not the field if work for you.

Written by: The Editorial Board.