

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bryan Delivers First Speech To St. Croix Chamber Of Commerce As Governor

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ST. CROIX -- The tradition of having USVI governors address the St. Croix Chamber of Commerce for its annual meeting continued on Thursday, with Governor Albert Bryan delivering his first speech to the organization at Gertrude's Restaurant in the morning. Mr. Bryan's talk ranged from youth development, facilitating business growth, managing the influx of federal dollars coming into the territory as a result of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, encouraging development of new hotels and growing St. Croix's tourism product.

The governor started out by recognizing the young entrepreneurs who were at the chamber meeting. "It's tough living in the Virgin Islands and it's tough starting out as a young Virgin Islander," he said. "As leaders in the community, to stop the brain drain,

we're going to have to recognize those youngsters and really encourage them to stay home, start businesses [and] contribute wherever they can in our community."

Mr. Bryan spoke of the importance of small businesses, deeming them "the livelihood of our community." The governor, who said he has two businesses, spoke of the frustration in trying to get things done with the local government, and how his experience while on the outside as a business owner would inform how he leads. Referring to chamber members, he said, "I know your concerns go even further because you have employees to pay, taxes to pay, rent and light. It's very, very disconcerting. So when I take this mantle as governor of the Virgin Islands, I take it with the understanding that the purpose and the role of the government is to provide the highest quality of life for our citizens, and to facilitate our businesses making money so we can collect taxes. So that's what we're going to do."

For St. Croix, the territory's leader said the island always seems to be either between feast or famine, and said for 2019, St. Croix is in a feast. The governor did not give figures, but the assumption is that he has information that convinced him the island was performing good economically.

But growth, he said, is painful in the Virgin Islands. "I'll be 51 next year, watching St. Thomas [grow] from a sleepy little town into a bustling tourist mecca, and then moving to St. Croix and seeing the decline of the Industrial Age. Even in St. John there is more activity in Cruz Bay on a regular night than there is in Christiansted. When you look at that, we've always looked forward to our times of feast, but we have not planned correctly, and we have not built the infrastructure that supports what comes with the feast," the governor said.

The territory's leader spoke of the myriad of projects happening around the Virgin Islands, many of which commenced under former Governor Kenneth Mapp. Yet the projects, while great for the territory, introduces new problems, Mr. Bryan pointed out. "If there's a problem that a governor wants to have, it's my problem. I have way too much capital coming in and too many capital projects going on all at the same time. Why is that a problem? Our infrastructure. We have to get our hospital back online; we're not in a good place right now. We have 1,200 people who were added to the island that come streaming out of the refinery like ants, I love it. But we have a police force that's overworked and undermanned in order to control them as well as the safety of other people in our community." Mr. Bryan spoke of roads that are in need of repair and the constant issue of drainage.

Yet while mentioning the projects made possible through disaster funding, Mr. Bryan said the central government, whose coffers he said were empty, continues to struggle. "Our capital in the government, even though we have over \$1.8 billion allotted to us through the Community Development Block Grant, we still suffer from serious financial problems and cash management at WAPA, Waste Management, hospitals and the central government," he said.

Mr. Bryan also spoke of the problem of manpower in the Virgin Islands, stating, "You can't find anybody to work. Whether it's work on your house or work in your business, finding good people is at a premium. And the last one, inflation, it is killing us. The price of everything is going up, especially labor. As the consultants come in, the cost of the

employees shoot through the roof. The refinery has opened up, that's great, but there is nowhere to stay. People looking for homes, whether it's people who live here all the time, or people coming in from the states to do work, there are no apartments available."

The governor also spoke of St. Thomas's problem relative to finding boding. He even said, "You guys know you still haven't found a place for me to stay over there, right?" I've been camping out on my campaign manager's couch, believe it or not, because the room for the night is \$800; that's real. The places I want to stay my, security won't allow me to."

Mr. Bryan said the government needs to look at a 20-year plan on how to control the \$10 billion of federal disaster funding that is expected to flow into the territory over the next four to five years.

Even so, the governor spoke of getting the real economy back on track, as the hurricane economy, thriving on the inpouring of federal dollars, will not last. For St. Croix, he said the island needed to add more rooms to facilitate its tourism product. He spoke of having regular cruise ship calls to the island, but highlighted the lack of places to stay as a challenge. Mr. Bryan said developers interested in starting projects in the territory have been reaching out to him, but he stressed that his interest lies with those who have the money, not individuals looking for the government to bankroll their projects. Nonetheless, he said having at least one new hotel built in the Virgin Islands -- he did not specify which island -- would boost the investor community's confidence and rekindle a wave of development. Mr. Bryan said it's been 20 years since a major hotel project was constructed in the Virgin Islands.

In closing his 20-minute speech before opening for questions, the governor vowed to work with chamber members, even when they disagree with his decisions. "We want to make sure that the Virgin Islands moves forward with a strong business community and a government that supports it... If nothing else, remember one thing: this administration understands that you are the people that we depend on to keep our community fed, clothed and happy. We are dependent on your success. We pledge to do all in our power to help you grow your profits in a way that benefits you, your family and your employees. We will do so in a manner that's fair and respectful."