The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dear Editor, Re Governor Bryan's Debt Refinancing Proposal: We Don't Need to Reinvent the Wheel

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Dear Editor,

We don't need to reinvent the wheel. Matthew Johnson in his scholarly and well researched paper titled "Black Gold of Paradise: Negotiating Oil Pollution in the US Virgin Islands" has laid out the research, data and justification for the return of gasoline taxes paid by HOVIC/HOVENSA, collected from 1966 through 2012, and paid to the U.S. Treasury. Naysayers would see this as a pie in the sky attempt to have the federal government bailout GERS, WAPA and the debt-ridden Virgin Islands from the brink of financial disaster. To quote the abstract of the article, "The refinery destroyed the territory's largest mangrove forest, fouled coastal waters, contaminated groundwater, and sent clouds of carcinogens into neighboring communities.”

Why should the Virgin Islands and oil industry concern the Biden administration? Recall that during the 2nd presidential debate, a major issue raised was environmental concerns with communities that were considered fence-line high risk, facing health issues from airborne pollutants. If you are interested Google “fence-line oil.” In the 2nd debate with President Trump, President-elect Biden committed to addressing many of the problems faced by fence-line communities. The residents of St. Croix, particularly those living in Estate Profit, Williams Delight, Harvey Project, Strawberry, Diamond Ruby, Ruby, Peters Rest, Humbug and Sion Farm are front-line communities. The 2nd presidential debate recognized that across the nation, these communities need serious attention.

How can the Virgin Islands achieve its goal of securing the gasoline excise tax? President-elect Biden has determined that he needs to issue a slew of executive orders to reverse many of the policies, executive orders, and regulations implemented by President Trump. The Virgin Islands is poised to have President Biden issue an executive order for Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen to return the gasoline excise tax to the Virgin Islands. The presidential executive order, under federal guidelines, can be drafted to address our GERS problem, energy and health concerns, and repair all of the environmental damage.

Please be reminded that the congressional plan for Puerto Rico (PROMESA) also applies to the Virgin Islands. Although a board has not been established for the Virgin Islands, the return of the entire gasoline excise tax money could prompt President Biden to establish such a board.

Borrowing again might be a short term quick fix. But unless the entire territory understands and embraces comprehensive debt restructuring, reduced spending, and government accountability, we will never realize the full financial capability as a territory.

Submitted on Tuesday by: Ronald Russell, an attorney and former senator.