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# Elected Officials React to Bryan's 3rd State of The Territory Address

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**Bryan greets Freshman Senator Genevieve Whitaker with a fist bump as he entered the V.I. Legislature building in St. Thomas Monday for his 3rd State of the Territory Address.  
By. VI LEGISLATURE**

After Governor Albert Bryan wrapped up his third State of the Territory address Monday night, the Consortium spoke with elected officials in phone interviews to share their initial thoughts about the governor's speech. Some lawmakers also shared statements via press releases, which we included.

Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory said, "The tone of the State of the Territory was quite optimistic, but the governor identified a number of things that he would like to accomplish this

calendar year and of course some of those things he mentioned are matters that many of us have submitted legislation around. So I'm looking forward to having a discussion with him as to how we can work together to move some of these matters forward. It must be a collaborative approach."

Ms. Frett-Gregory said one of the things that stood out to her was the plan to pay back government employees their eight percent pay cut through the collection of excise taxes. She submitted legislation previously that would use the same excise tax to help the Government Employees' Retirement System (GERS). "We are going to have to work that out," she said.

Ms. Frett-Gregory was concerned that Mr. Bryan spoke about the demolition of schools without mentioning anything to look forward to. "We didn't get a feel for what to expect as it relates to new schools in the Virgin Islands," she said.

Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett told the Consortium, "I was heartened to hear of the projects that he believes are shovel-ready at this time and the fruition of so much work and funding." Ms. Plaskett said her office has been working with the Office of the Governor to ascertain that federal funds were in place to support the projects.

Broadband connections is an issue that Ms. Plaskett said she has been working on for years. "The pandemic has shown how critical that is for all of our children to have the Internet to succeed, and I'm grateful for the work that the Department of Education has done to get Chromebooks and Internet access to students in the public school systems."

Ms. Plaskett said over 2,000 small businesses in the USVI took advantage of the Paycheck Protection Program and "outpaced" states and other territories in qualifying for federal aid.

Additionally, the congresswoman mentioned Mr. Bryan's opening statement where he said that having a Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate is "advantageous" for the Virgin Islands. "Having a Senate that is a Democratic majority, having a president that is a Democratic as well means that many of the bills in the agenda, not all of them, have a greater chance of passing," she said.

Ms. Plaskett explained that some of the president's cabinet members are her friends and this could benefit the territory as well. Marcia Fudge, for example, who is Mr. Biden's pick for Department of Housing and Urban Development secretary, was Ms. Plaskett's mentor for the past six years. Cedric Richmond, who is going to be the senior policy advisor for the president, helped Ms. Plaskett after Hurricanes Irma and Maria. There are more connections that the congresswoman has in Washington, but, she said, "We have people that we can pick up the phone, text and feel supported."

Senate Majority Leader Marvin Blyden said he thought the speech was "upbeat" and "optimistic." Mr. Blyden was pleased that the governor addressed industries that have been doing well in the territory such as the revitalization of the marine industry, RT Park and the different road projects. On the marine industry he said, "There are so many opportunities in that space and I'm happy to see the administration taking advantage and doing what must be done in terms of advancing that industry in many ways."

Mr. Blyden hoped to hear more about the V.I. Housing Finance Authority and the Envision Program. He believes "many, many families are having a hard time finding affordable housing in the territory."

Minority Caucus leader Frankie Johnson told the Consortium that he was disappointed that Mr. Bryan did not provide an update on the roofing program. "As I fly from one island to the next, you can see how many people still have a blue tarp. We're going into year three (of the project) and the roofing program hasn't gotten off the ground properly."

He added, "A lot of projects are at a stalemate. This is the time to aggressively use these federal funds and make sure these projects are complete, so that by the time Covid-19 passes we are ready to lead the Caribbean in the tourism industry."

Mr. Johnson also expressed concern about the stalling of the Randall "Doc" James horse racing track on St. Croix. He explained that just because there is an impasse with the St. Thomas track doesn't mean progress should be slowed on Croix. In the past when there were problems on the St. Croix track, work in St. Thomas continued, he said.

Mr. Johnson made sure to touch on Mr. Bryan's success of doing a good job of handling the Covid-19 pandemic in the territory.

Veteran lawmaker Janelle Sarauw was not impressed with Mr. Bryan's speech on education, and said he spoke too long about Covid-19. "In light of the governor having weekly press briefings, I felt that his speech was overly saturated with Covid-19 updates," she said.

On Education, Ms. Sarauw said, "Education cannot just be rebuilding of schools. Where are we on our literacy rates? He said that graduation rates improved, and if you have to fact-check, when you pass all students because of the new grading policy, it's not fair to boast that graduation rates improved. He just scraped through education."

She added, "He didn't talk about affordable housing and part of our brain drain is the fact that housing is so difficult to maintain whether you want to rent or you want to build. He didn't talk about renewable energy."

Senator Kurt Vialet, the chairman of the powerful Senate Committee on Finance, said Mr. Bryan took a lot of credit for work being done in the territory while failing to acknowledge the Legislature, whose involvement and action have been indelible to progress. "He had a positive outlook and spoke a lot about Covid-19, but he definitely failed to tie his positive outlook with the possible completion of many projects with the fact that those projects were a direct result of the actions of the 31st, 32nd and 33rd Legislatures," Mr. Vialet said.

"He touched on public safety and education, but he didn't hone into the details that I think the community is waiting to hear in reference to the reopening of schools and the plan moving forward. Mr. Vialet said one of President Joe Biden's platform promises is an executive order to open K-8 schools by the end of April. He said Mr. Bryan failed to detail the Dept. of Education's plan to that end.

Freshman Senator Sammuel Carrion said in a release, "In general, I would've liked more specifics in the speech in terms of the initiatives he referenced. I will definitely be following up with the Governor on the new Office of Gun Violence and on his proposed on-the-job training program in the days ahead, as well as on the projects that fall under purview of the Committee on Sports, Parks & Recreation."

Mr. Carrion noted the governor's handling of the pandemic as a success, but expressed concern for what he said was the lack of a clear vaccination plan. "Lives were likely saved as a result of his proactive stance," the senator said. "Unfortunately, what we didn't hear in this speech were any

details of plans for the vaccination of Virgin Islanders. It is only through widespread vaccination that we can begin a return to normalcy. I am especially concerned about reaching out to older Virgin Islanders to ensure their access to the vaccine, as many remain very isolated."

Mr. Carriòn said he disagreed with Mr. Bryan's remarks regarding the "billing system" representing the most glaring problem at the Virgin Islands Water & Power Authority. "The outrageous bills are the most glaring problem, not the billing system," he said. "We are paying sky high rates that make it very expensive to live and work here in the Virgin Islands. Combined with frequent outages, it's a major issue for most families and a huge deterrent to economic growth."

Senator Kenneth Gittens said in a press release, "Governor Albert Bryan's third speech is essentially a mid-term progress report. We are still in the midst of this pandemic, but we do seem to be making some progress in terms of recovery projects, hotel development and other major infrastructure improvements. While nothing is happening fast enough, the fact that we have kept our heads above water during this most challenging period is a testament to the strength of all the people of this Territory. Unfortunately, some of the Governor's announcements were vague and lacked timelines. I will be working with my colleagues to provide the oversight and support necessary to see these projects through."