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A True Miracle on Main Street as Ribbon is Cut to Signify Oft-Delayed Enhancement Project's Completion

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Ribbon-cutting event on Thursday, May 27, 2021 at Main Street in Charlotte Amalie for an oft-delayed enhancement project. By. KYLE MURPHY FOR VI CONSORTIUM

CHARLOTTE AMALIE, ST. THOMAS — Afters years of setbacks, delays and restarts, the Main Street Enhancement Project has finally been completed, and government along with private sector stakeholders celebrated the milestone with a ribbon-cutting ceremony here Thursday.

“Today we witnessed a true miracle on Main Street,” said Governor Albert Bryan during a speech moments before he cut the ribbon to symbolize the completion of the project, which beautifies the area with wider blue bit stone sidewalks and Euro Cobble pavers among other improvements to the popular tourist outlet.

Dept. of Public Works Commissioner Designee Derek Gabriel thanked all the dignitaries in attendance and his team for making the completion of the project a reality. “This was pulled together by an amazing team... they did all the great work, without them I would not be able to stand here today and I really appreciate them,” he said while giving remarks.

Mr. Gabriel recognized that the project enhances one of the busiest business districts in St. Thomas. “Main Street has always been the thriving center of commerce dating back to the inception of Charlotte Amalie,” he said.

Mr. Gabriel noted some of the things that won’t necessarily be seen but “bears recognition,” like accommodations for underground utilities, communication conduits and drainage improvements. “This means we won’t be re-digging for the foreseeable future,” he said, added that the last step is to move cables underground and remove the historic utility poles that remain.

One of the major changes Mr. Gabriel said will affect Virgin Islanders is the elimination of parking on Main Street to allow for wider sidewalks and the passage of emergency vehicles. He asked that the changes be respected.



Governor Albert Bryan is joined by public and private sector stakeholders as he cut the ribbon signifying the completion of the oft-

According to the booklet provided at the event, the enhancement project began in 2016 during the Mapp administration and cost over \$15 million. During his remarks, Mr. Bryan said the revitalization of the Main Street area began in 2008.

The scope of work included underground utilities, drainage improvements, installation of a new portable water distribution line, widening of the sidewalks, historic lighting, improvements to Post Office Square, and beautification improvements.

Mr. Bryan characterized the project through a pair of bible verses. "Weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth because lord have mercy, when Governor John de Jongh took upon this project he was just as brave as Andy (Smith) here, thinking of shutting down Main Street for months on end." Mr. Bryan gave credit to his predecessors and multiple commissioners of DPW that contributed to the effort. "Because it was weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth for more than 8 years. Since 2008 — more than 13 years of crying — and I get to sit here today because weeping endures and joy cometh in the morning," the governor said.

His reference to Andy was directed at Andy Smith, the president of Island Roads Corporation, who said, "A lot of people have called me very brave or very stupid to take on this project.. And I'll let you guys decide whether we are brave or stupid."

Governor Bryan acknowledged in his remarks that while Thursday's ribbon-cutting marked notable progress, there is still plenty of work that needs to be done. "Over those 13 years we saw the progress of Main Street getting prettier and prettier, but the decay of lack of business opportunities getting bigger and bigger," he said before talking about businesses that have since closed on Main Street during the duration of the project.

He added that while "it is important today to talk about the progress and where we've come, it's about what we are going to do. We are going to take some of those [Community Development Block Grant Program] (CDBG) funds and we are going to leverage those funds to finally put Main Street vendors who are local, have local arts and crafts and be able to afford to pay the rent to be on Main Street."

Renee C. Exius, master of ceremony, introduced Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory by using a quote from her website about legislation the senator sponsored, the VI Pride Act, that Ms. Exius felt was relevant to the celebration. "We must clean our islands first for Virgin Islanders and in return our visitors get the collateral joy of enjoying the beauty we have created for ourselves," she said.

Ms. Frett-Gregory stated, "This Main Street Enhancement Project has been a long time in the making after many false starts and delays. I'm sure all of us are very emotional today about the fact that we are here to witness the official opening which signifies that this project is complete."

She said the project's completion also represents something bigger. "This ceremony is a signal to all throughout the world, not only us here in the Virgin Islands, that with the vaccine rollout that we are returning here in the Virgin Islands to some level of normalcy," Ms. Frett-Gregory also said that Mr. Bryan and his team did an excellent job of managing the pandemic.

She further stated that the project wasn't simply road-paving, but "an investment in retaining and rebuilding businesses and revitalizing the downtown district here in Charlotte Amalie."

Mr. Gabriel wrapped up his welcome remarks with a similar statement. "I stand before you today beaming from ear to ear. Soon we will have the sounds, sights and smells of carnival moving back through Charlotte Amalie... Even sooner we will have cruise ships returning to our shores. I can stand here before you today and say we are ready to accept our visitors with open arms in a safe and healthy environment."

Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach spoke about the beauty of seeing multiple projects ongoing and the importance of the local people during his remarks. "It is beautiful to envision a Waterfront Expansion Project, a Main Street Revitalization Project, an airport project which all combine to bring back this wow factor that St. Thomas has never lost," he said. "It is easy to envision that but we must always remember what gives a town its vitality are the people of the place. That does not mean you do not welcome and take care of your visitors, it means that you are ever mindful that you must integrate the people of that town in its revitalization."

The Department of Public Works acknowledged the following people and organizations in a booklet distributed at the event: Islands Roads Corporation, Jaredian Design Group, St. Thomas St. John Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Revitalization, Former Commissioner of Public Works Nelson Petty, Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett, the Federal Highway Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Interior, the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, the Virgin Islands State Historic Preservation Office, the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority, the Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority, the Virgin Islands Next Generation Network, and VIYA.