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# The State of the Territory 'is Stronger Than Ever,' Bryan Declares in Final Address Ahead of Reelection

Government / **Published On January 25, 2022 07:19 AM /**

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**Governor Albert Bryan on Mon. Jan. 24, 2022 Delivered his final State of the Territory Address ahead of his reelection bid. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE**

Governor Albert Bryan opened his final State of the Territory Address ahead of the upcoming gubernatorial election on a high note, declaring his pleasure to be at the Senate as he embarked on an ambitious speech that revealed at least two major announcements, highlighted accomplishments, and touched of ongoing challenges the governor vowed to address.

Mr. Bryan is expected to face at least one formidable challenge to his candidacy this year, and with many Virgin Islanders still trying to find their footing following the pandemic-induced whiplash on everything from their finances, employment and health, the stakes could not be

higher.

The governor appeared a bit nervous at the beginning, but any anxiousness he experienced vanished as Mr. Bryan got into stride. Keen of the Senate's roll in getting his agenda moving, Mr. Bryan presented a gift to Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory and spoke of the importance of working together.

Setting the stage, the governor spoke of the economic rebound the U.S. Virgin Islands was experiencing following the 2017 storms spurred by post-hurricane construction activity, a booming housing market and growth in the tourism sector. But then came the sudden calamity of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, which forever changed the trajectory of the Virgin Islands and the world. Using this foundation as his backdrop, Mr. Bryan conveyed an administration that not only successfully managed a pandemic that was rapidly changing, but also delivered on his core agenda while taking advantage of opportunities brought about by the pandemic — including well over a billion dollars in Covid relief funds.

To that end, the governor declared, "As I stand here tonight, I am happy to report that the State of the Territory is stronger than ever and only getting stronger."

"By October 2021, the economy had regained almost 95 percent of jobs lost during the peak of the pandemic, and the unemployment rate fell to 8 percent—a full 5.6 percent from the initial height. Visitor volume recovered nearly 80 percent from its 2020 low, and we started to draw regional and national attention as to how well we were doing, despite Covid," Mr. Bryan said as he worked to convey that his handling of the pandemic has led to a resurgence in economic activity in the USVI.

From growth in the tourism sector, which he said has led to accolades from leading tourism publications, to fiscal policy that the governor stated has resulted in budget surpluses not seen in fifteen years, Mr. Bryan sought to convince Virgin Islanders that his leadership in the last three years has made the Virgin Islands a better place.

On tourism, he said, "Our hotel sector is also showing strong signs of recovery from the effects of the 2017 hurricanes and the impacts of the pandemic. According to reports from STR, a leader in hospitality data reporting, we have consistently led the Caribbean in Average Daily Rates throughout the pandemic. In 2020, our occupancy rate was 46 percent, an Average Daily Rate of \$295. In 2021, our occupancy rate grew to 70 percent, an Average Daily Rate of \$495."

On government finances, he stated, "Over the last three years of this Administration, we have seen the annual revenue collections exceed the revenue projections, creating budget surpluses that have not been seen in over 15 years, despite the pandemic. Furthermore, we have actually reduced the indebtedness of the government by over \$500 million in the last three years."

Relative to Covid-19, the governor [continued encouraging vaccination](#), and revealed that 62 percent of the eligible Virgin Islands population have been fully vaccinated against the virus, a percentage that considers the [USVI 2020 Census](#) that puts the territory's population at 87,146, representing a decrease of 18.1% from the 2010 Census population of 106,405.

Mr. Bryan highlighted his commissioners, directors and other leaders paramount to the successful handling of the pandemic. "We have been blessed with a strong leadership team that has assisted me in decision-making," he said.

The two big announcements of the night were focused on repaying gov't employees past and present, and bringing relief to Virgin Islanders struggling with V.I. Water and Power Authority bills. The governor [announced](#) that his administration has put together a plan that will pay the government's outstanding debt in retroactive wages to former and present employees dating back to 1990.

He also announced a plan [whose aim is to provide small residential WAPA customers with energy independence](#) through the installation of solar panels at their homes. The program targets 1,000 WAPA customers per year, and these customers will still be connected to WAPA for standby power.

The announcements hit at the core of two major issues in the territory, and will bolster Mr. Bryan's reelection campaign if he's able to execute them. More broadly at WAPA, the governor said, "It is clear to me that WAPA has three urgent priorities: expedite the installation of [the recently delivered Wartsila generators](#) that will improve power plant efficiency; immediately refinance the debt owed to VITOL for the construction of the propane terminals; and fast-track the renewable energy projects in the pipeline."

Also addressed was funding to stave off collapse of the Government Employees' Retirement System with a solution that [was made public late last month](#). "Our success in this endeavor will also send a powerful signal to the financial markets that the U.S. Virgin Islands is getting its financial house in order," he said. "Most importantly, there are nearly 17,500 retirees and active employees who are depending on our actions."

Mr. Bryan spoke of projects current and ongoing, and named many completed road projects in both districts. He mentioned work completed and others near completion at the V.I. Port Authority as well, led by Carlton Dowe who is known for getting things done.

Work at the oft-delayed Paul E. Joseph Stadium has [recommenced](#), and Mr. Bryan asked the Legislature for an additional \$3 million for further enhancements he said would add value to the finished project. The governor spoke of another troubled project, JFL North, and said it would be [completed by summer](#).

Housing remains a major problem in the territory, and Mr. Bryan acknowledged that the shortage "threatens to derail the economic growth of the U.S. Virgin Islands." He spoke of a bill [he signed into law](#) whose aim is to help first-time homebuyers with their purchase. "This provides an additional tool in our efforts to financially support Virgin Islanders seeking to purchase land for home construction, build or purchase a house, or repair or rehabilitate an existing house for use as their primary residence," the governor said. "That measure supplements the \$70 million for homeownership construction and first-time homebuyer assistance already earmarked in HUD funding by the Housing Finance Authority, as well as the \$10 million we allocated in American Rescue Plan Act funding by the Office of Management and Budget for affordable housing."

Mr. Bryan said the V.I. Housing Finance Authority will begin renovating the Walter I.M. Hodge Pavilion community in Frederiksted thanks to \$78.6 million in multi-grant financing. "Work is expected to start this month and will completely rehabilitate 248 units in this housing community, including several buildings that were abandoned long before the hurricanes struck the Territory in 2017," he said. The governor also spoke of the recently completed, [60-unit, 9-story complex named Magens Junction](#).

Speaking of another housing development, the governor said the Donoe Redevelopment Project continues to progress and is slated to be completed in December. "That is a \$57.4 million housing

development that will consist of 84 affordable rental units on St. Thomas. The buildings at Tutu Hi-Rise are now being demolished to clear the way for a new development there," he said.

On the V.I. Police Department, the governor spoke of a number of initiatives aimed at reducing crime and bringing aboard new employees. He also announced Antonio Emanuel as director for the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, which was [recently allocated \\$2 million](#).

Relative to Education, the governor said the Covid-19 pandemic, "without question, disrupted the Virgin Islands Department of Education's normal operations and impacted the quality of teaching and learning for the past three school years." Even so, Mr. Bryan said the department "has done its best to overcome these challenges and provide a quality learning experience for all of our students. While Covid has been a distraction, it has not dominated our attention."

After highlighting some of the department's accomplishments to include graduation numbers, Mr. Bryan honed in on what he said was concern for the level of academic proficiency demonstrated by students in general. "According to our most recent standardized test results, 22.3 percent of 3rd graders performed on grade level in reading and 16.9 percent in math. While this is actually an improvement over our pre-Covid era scores and evidence that the Department's targeted academic interventions are working, it is still well below the level of performance that we aspire for our children. There is still much work to do to get all students reading on grade level," the governor said, as he announced that he has allocated \$1.5 million to the community foundations in each district for numeracy and literacy programs that keep students engaged after school, on weekends, and during the summer.

Mr. Bryan spoke of the physical condition of the territory's public schools, referring to the issue as of "paramount concern" to his administration. "Our schools were badly damaged by the hurricanes in 2017, but they are also afflicted by years of deferred maintenance, and most are simply showing their age," Mr. Bryan said. "We were very proud to unveil the new 9th grade annex at the Charlotte Amalie High School. It is the first glimpse into what modern school construction will look like in the Virgin Islands."

Problems persist with the [EnVision Tomorrow program](#), especially its slow pace of execution. The governor said, "Our reality is, any program generous enough to grant a homeowner as much as \$250,000 of federal tax dollars to invest in their private property with no requirement for payback, demands significant checks and balances. However, for those who are patient in tolerating the federal bureaucracy of this program, the reward is tremendous."

Notwithstanding the challenges, including billions of dollars in announced projects that have yet to get off the ground, the governor declared that it was an exciting time for the Virgin Islands.

"There are wonderful opportunities permeating throughout our community. But to appreciate them, we must not succumb to the usual cynicism. Realizing greater progress and increased prosperity is indeed a community project. We all must do our part as leaders and citizens. We all want the best for the Virgin Islands. Senators, if we put aside our personal ambitions and individual agendas just long enough, we can achieve greater results for the people of the Virgin Islands. Lieutenant Governor Roach and I are confident of this. So, let us move forward together on a path that builds on the trust that the people have placed in us to govern with competence and integrity," Mr. Bryan concluded.