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Bryan Predicts Influx of Workforce From Caribbean as Disaster Recovery Construction Ramps Up; Population Growth Expected in Coming Years

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A top-down aerial view of a home under construction. By. GETTY IMAGES

Governor Albert Bryan says that within the next ten years he is expecting a major increase in immigrants from within the Caribbean to help build back the Virgin Islands through various recovery projects stemming from Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

The influx, he believes will be linked directly to the construction sector and the people who will be moving are mostly coming from the U.S. mainland, Puerto Rico as well as the Western and Eastern Caribbean, he said.

“The Eastern and Western Caribbean in particular because they are going to be the people who will say it's ok for me to stay in a house with four other people or five other families,” Mr. Bryan said Friday during the Spring 2022 Revenue Estimating Conference, an event put on by the government to assess the territory's financial standing. “They are going to make that sacrifice to get those jobs and then eventually we will be built out.”

Mr. Bryan was responding to a question that focused on the readiness of the territory to provide labor for the several construction projects that are currently taking place as well as what will become available within the next 24 months.

Millions of dollars from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and central government funding are set to be invested in the construction of roads and other construction projects, and the governor disclosed that one of the things that no one has talked about which he sees becoming a real hurdle is workforce capacity in executing these projects.

“So while we may have \$50 million of housing that can be built this year, do we have \$50 million of workforce? That is one of the real hurdles in getting these projects out, you look at all of them and now that money is hitting the road we need to count on bonding capacity, workforce capacity and housing because we have to import people to do this work,” he said.

Relative to bonding capacity, the local government must provide a cost share amount of 10 percent to trigger the release of FEMA federal funding set aside for the USVI. For example, for a release of \$100 million in FEMA funding for a particular project, the local government must put up \$10 million. If it can't, the funds won't be released. [Efforts](#) to have the federal government remove the 10 percent match haven't been successful.

Mr. Bryan told a V.I. Housing Finance Authority representative that while V.I.H.F.A. is a big part of putting this money into the economy, it also has a major role to play in getting housing done. He also suggested that more money could be allocated to multi-unit housing so as to expand housing availability, especially in the St. Thomas-St John district.

Referring to examples of construction projects, the governor said, “In St. Thomas this year we are continuing the construction of the Marriott, we sold Sugar Bay and that construction is going to be on by 2023. All these things are going to affect the availability of housing and the availability of workers, especially in this district,” he predicted. The Marriott hotel rebuild is a private venture; Mr. Bryan was speaking in general about examples of projects ongoing across the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Mr. Bryan disclosed that in anticipation of the non-resident jobseekers, right now there is a shift in housing priorities with a move from single-family housing to multi-dwelling units.

Making it clear that the workforce market will be for skilled people, he reminded the participants that in the 70s there was an influx of immigrants who contributed to building the Virgin Islands. “What we see today, those people did not come from here, those people came from Trinidad, Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Kitts, Anguilla, Tortola, the same thing is going to happen again.... And this time I am expecting to see people from Haiti, the Dominican Republic – legal and illegal come to help us do this recovery,” he said.

Speaking after V.I.H.F.A. CFO Valdez Shelford presented on various initiatives of the authority, which includes CDBG funding, the disaster recovery allocations, and expenditures for disaster recovery, the governor said the challenge to welcoming immigrants is getting the infrastructure like housing, school, healthcare, public safety, and crime-fighting ready.

“Extreme circumstances are going to be put on those; pressure is going to be put on those places because these people are going to have the least number of resources. Those are the plans that we are making now,” he said while disclosing that there has been extensive discussion on doing a geographic information system, or G.I.S. map for the recovery.

“Like where we place government housing, our new housing communities are going to switch to slower traffic...All these things go into planning so that in the next ten years we will not end up in chaos because we expect population growth,” he said.

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