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Read Gov. Bryan's Full 2020 State of the Territory Address

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State of the Territory Address book cover By. GOVERNMENT HOUSE

Governor Albert Bryan on Monday delivered his second State of the Territory Address since becoming governor. Read it in full below.

2020 State of the Territory Address

Reverend Leroy Luke, the Honorable Lt. Governor Tregenza A. Roach, the Honorable Senate President Novelle E. Francis, Jr. and members of the 33rd Legislature, the Honorable Delegate to Congress Stacey E. Plaskett, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Virgin Islands the Honorable Rhys Hodge and the other Honorable Justices of the Supreme Court of the Virgin Islands, the Honorable Harold W. L. Willocks, Presiding Judge, and other Honorable Judges of

the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands, Chief Judge of the District Court of the Virgin Islands, the Honorable Wilma A. Lewis and the Honorable Judges of the District Court, The Honorable Gretchen Shappert, U.S. Attorney for the District of the Virgin Islands, members of the Cabinet and other agency heads, my wife Yolanda Bryan, invited guests, and my fellow Virgin Islanders; good evening.

I begin by expressing gratitude to the servicemen and women of our Virgin Islands Army and Air National Guard. Tonight, as I speak to you, airmen of our 285th Combat Engineer Squadron are deployed to Africa and Kuwait, and soldiers of the 661st Military Police Unit are deployed to Qatar.

We thank them and their families for their selfless service to our nation. As we are now in a time of great uncertainty in the Middle East, please keep them and the other Virgin Islanders serving in active duty across the globe in your thoughts and prayers.

This evening, our thoughts and prayers are also with the people of Puerto Rico as they suffer through the repeated earthquakes of the last few weeks. Our familial, social and commercial ties to the people of Puerto Rico are undeniable. Therefore, when they suffer, it affects us deeply. We pray for their speedy recovery from this most recent set of disasters and ask our residents to remain vigilant and stay prepared.

Tonight, I appear before you for the second time as Governor of the Virgin Islands of the United States to report on the State of the Territory as mandated in the Revised Organic Act of 1954. Informed by the knowledge of the true state of the government after having served a full year in office, we have laid a foundation for moving forward based on our assessments. This past year has been one of trials and triumphs.

Last January, the Lieutenant Governor and I took the helm of a government that was in a state of distress. The Government of the Virgin Islands had less than a few days of cash on hand. The outgoing financial team warned of potential cash shortfalls and the prospect of a missed payroll last March.

Our government was attempting to balance the budget with revenues from a refinery that had not yet received its federal environmental permits to open and begin refining. Our government was attempting to balance the budget with excise tax revenues that the federal courts had expressly barred us from collecting.

Our hotel industry and tourism product, which is the largest contributor to our economy, was devastated by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. We were staring down the Medicaid fiscal cliff that threatened to take thousands of Virgin Islanders off their sole source of health insurance and increase the government healthcare costs.

While the promise of billions of dollars in federal recovery aid existed, we quickly recognized the Government of the Virgin Islands did not yet have the capacity required to navigate the vast bureaucracy necessary to access those funds.

The roofing program administered by the Housing Finance Authority hung in limbo with a deadline that would leave 2,000 Virgin Islanders roofless. We had not yet received the necessary approvals from FEMA to fully compensate the contractors who were doing the work much less to move forward with an extension of the program that would make Virgin Islanders whole.

This time last year, many of our instrumentalities were also in distress. The Federal Aviation Administration or (FAA) was threatening to close the Cyril E. King Airport for failure to properly maintain the runway and to institute adequate safety measures. The FAA also continued its warnings of the possible closure of the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport as a result of the failure to cease operations at the Anguilla landfill. Our hospitals were in dire straits trying to provide critical healthcare to patients in storm-ravaged facilities.

The Department of Labor was on the brink of federal receivership, and the HeadStart program was also in fiscal trouble; boards and commissions were without quorums or were depending on members whose terms had long since expired. Our schools were disrupted with some campuses and buildings slated for demolition, and the countdown clock to the insolvency of the Government Employees Retirement System continued ticking.

The Bryan-Roach Administration knew that fully solving each one of these issues would not be possible within the first twelve months of taking office. However, I can confidently report this evening that the state of our territory is on the mend.

Guided by our three mandates, we have set the territory on a new course to a brighter Virgin Islands for all of us. We are stabilizing our government to restore public trust. We are continuing the recovery and rebuilding effort. And we are laying a solid foundation in which to grow our Virgin Islands economy.

Our strategy for achieving stability for the Government of the Virgin Islands is perhaps best illustrated in the Fiscal Year 2020 budget. That budget plan, submitted last May, was substantially approved and went into effect on October 1st. The budget reflects the Bryan-Roach Administration's core beliefs that we must live within our means, pay what is owed and prepare for an uncertain future. I thank you for your support in embracing that approach.

The Fiscal Year 2020 budget is a conservative spending plan based on realistic projections of revenue collections. It is not a wish list of things we would like to do; it is a plan of action based on what we can afford to do.

It addresses the need to adequately compensate workers in the public sector to attract and retain talented employees. The budget includes full funding for the pay increases promised by the previous administration during the 2018 campaign to gain reelection. This added 41 million dollars to the payroll of the central government.

It also includes additional funding in anticipation of concluding contract negotiations with the bargaining units. Perhaps most significant is that we managed to balance our first year's budget with no additional borrowing, no presumption of collecting back taxes and without the collection of the excise taxes.

Always mindful that we must be prudent, we have included a \$5 million dollar appropriation to the Budget Stabilization Fund as a cash reserve for rainy days, which we know are sure to come. Thank you, Director Jenifer O'Neal and the staff at the Office of Management and Budget for your leadership in carefully crafting our Administration's first budget.

In stabilizing the government, we are not only seeking the public's trust, but also the trust of our investors. We are progressing in our goal to rebuild the confidence of all financial investors in the Virgin Islands. Tonight, I am pleased to announce that we have seen the first significant bond rating improvement in a very long time. Standard and Poor's Global Ratings raised the Territory's outlook from negative to stable and affirmed its "A" rating on the USVI Garvee bonds.

Likewise, our formerly "unstable" Caa3 bonds and the ratings on the territory's four liens of Public Finance Authority's matching fund revenue bonds were confirmed as "stable" by Moody's Investor Service.

The upgraded bond ratings are due to recent improvements in the government's liquidity and near-term financial position driven by the receipt of federal disaster assistance, a surge in tax revenues from reconstruction and an increase in concession fees from the Limetree refinery facility. This puts the territory in a much-improved position to secure financing for major capital improvement and other projects at lower, more favorable rates.

In our goal to rebuild the confidence of all financial investors, we hosted an investor conference in December. This effort, led by the PFA board and Director of Finance and Administration Nathan Simmonds, is a first step towards improving our standing with all credit rating agencies, which has declined over the last six years. We have no immediate need for central government borrowing but have begun the work on restoring access to the municipal bond markets.

But an important part of stabilizing our government and restoring public trust is to be open. Lt. Governor Roach and I have committed to leading an Administration that is honest, transparent and accountable. In keeping with that commitment, we launched an official government transparency website in April 2019, the first of its kind in the territory. The website, transparency.vi.gov, contains a comprehensive real-time database of revenues and expenditures of the territory's funds and is accessible to all. As we demonstrate our commitment to be the best stewards of the government's dollars, all Virgin Islanders are encouraged to visit the site regularly for updates on our fiscal position.

The pending insolvency of the Government Employees Retirement System remains a looming threat to the economic and fiscal well-being of the territory. Our approach to addressing this has not changed from our presentations during the campaign. To preserve the pensions of existing retirees, we must approach this from two directions. We must provide a cash infusion to increase the investment portfolio of the System before it liquidates its assets to the point of insolvency. Then we must restructure the existing benefits package to make the plan for current and future employees more sustainable.

We have been actively pursuing sustainable revenue streams that are large enough to support a bond issuance to provide the necessary cash infusion. We are in active discussions with rum distillers that are interested in starting operations in the Virgin Islands. We have begun lobbying efforts on increasing the Virgin Islands share of the Caribbean Basin Initiative funding and support the efforts of this body in pursuing the capture of the gasoline excise taxes.

This past December, I called the Senate into special session to consider the passage of an amendment to the Medicinal Cannabis Patient Care Act. The existing law legalized medical cannabis cultivation, manufacturing, dispensing and consumption. The proposed amendment submitted to this body amends the law to restrict locations in which cannabis-related activities can take place; it facilitates access to this emerging market for small commercial farmers; and it establishes preferences for participation in the industry by local businesses. It provides automatic expungement of criminal records for previous minor cannabis-related infractions.

Most importantly, it creates a taxing regime for the local industry that will generate higher revenues than the current law allows. We have proposed that 75 percent of those revenues be dedicated to the Government Employees Retirement System. Twenty percent would support the regulation of the industry, and the other five percent would fund programs for our senior citizens. The revenues generated from this industry can benefit the System as a direct contribution. However, the goal is to create a funding stream that is reliable enough to ultimately support a revenue bond that can provide a needed cash infusion to the system.

This is by no means the panacea or final solution for the GERS crisis, but a small part of a larger solution. It begins the process of generating the new revenues required to stave off the insolvency of the System. It takes existing policy, approved by this body, and leverages it to support this critical area of need. We must acknowledge the opportunities that regulated expansion of this industry can bring to the territory and the potential benefits to the GERS. I urge this body to take the necessary action to approve the amending legislation we have proposed.

At this time in our history, with so much riding on federal recovery funds, we have to be ever vigilant. Many in our community are quick to raise the specter of overwhelming public corruption within the government. And while there have been prominent cases of public corruption, it has

been our experience thus far that it is more speculation than truth. However, this pervasive belief undermines the fundamental trust that we are striving to rebuild in our residents towards our government.

Attorney General Denise George and the staff at the Department of Justice recently led a successful prosecution of a long-standing case within the past administration of the Roy Lester Schneider Hospital. I want to applaud her and her staff for finally bringing that case to a conclusion after eight years and successfully pursuing justice on behalf of the people of the Virgin Islands.

We must continue prosecuting these cases and win back the public's trust, which is why we included in the Fiscal Year 2020 budget funding to reinstate the white-collar crime unit. It is also why, even after the Legislature's rejection, we have requested a supplement to the budget to reconstitute this unit within the Department of Justice.

I call on this body again to appropriate the funding necessary for the creation of this unit. We must be serious about weeding out corruption and the perception of corruption from our government and safeguarding our taxpayer dollars.

Restoring the public's trust is more than just committing to transparency and accountability, it is also about providing the services the public deserves — the services that ensure the safety and security of our residents, especially the most vulnerable among us.

We can no longer accept untimely responses to critical emergencies. We can no longer afford to place our citizens in the position of having to render immediate emergency care or drive themselves or a loved one to the hospital in an emergency. We can no longer accept people dying waiting on an ambulance, and so we are placing the help where it is needed.

We have created a clear pathway for the full integration of Emergency Medical Services into the Virgin Islands Fire Service. We have developed and presented to this body a thorough plan for the operational management and proper regulation of the combined entity to be known as the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Service, or "FEMS."

With the passage of this legislation, we will soon have a full cadre of cross-trained/multi-role firefighters trained at the minimum to the Emergency Medical Responder level.

While change is often met with hesitation, we can all agree that the community needs and deserves reduced ambulance response times to medical emergencies. Moving ambulances closer to our neighborhoods and having emergency response personnel available to respond to medical emergencies from our fire stations can mean the difference between life and death.

I assure the dedicated emergency medical technicians and paramedics who are making the transition from the Department of Health will be met with respect and professional management. I join the residents of this territory in thanking you for your willingness to make this change. Thank you to Fire Service Director Daryl George Sr. and Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion for your steadfast support of this initiative.

I trust I will have the support of this body to approve this legislation within the first quarter of this year so that we can make excessive waiting on an ambulance by the residents in Frederiksted, Fortuna or Coral Bay a thing of the past.

This Fire-EMS integration, along with the Street Addressing Initiative currently underway in the Lieutenant Governor's office, will rebuild the confidence of our residents that first responders will quickly get to them in their most desperate times of need. The Street Addressing Initiative may be the most important infrastructure project in modern Virgin Islands history. Ensuring that every street in this Territory has an address is going to be life-changing for the members of this Virgin Islands community. I commend Chris George, Director of the Geospatial Information Systems

Division within the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, for the work being done on this initiative.

One year ago, as I stood here before you, our community was reeling from a scourge of gun violence, which had claimed the lives of five people in January alone.

I vowed, then, that our Administration would work double-time to ensure we do something about it. And while we have seen slightly fewer gun-related deaths this year than in 2018, the 36 men and women, mostly young people whose lives were tragically cut short, is 36 too many.

Last year, the VIPD, through its Virgin Islands Crime Initiative, removed 150 illegal firearms from our streets and made 75 related arrests. The VIPD has also made 17 arrests in open homicide cases in 2019 alone.

To the families and loved ones of the victims, I stand here today to tell you that we will not stop until we bring those responsible to justice and until we rid our territory once and of all of these illegal weapons.

We will not stop until we keep illegal firearms out of the hands of our young people and convince them to embrace alternatives to a life of crime. We will not stop until they understand that disputes or disagreements don't have to end in taking the life of their brother or sister.

The dedicated men and women of our Virgin Islands Police Department are on the front line of this effort. In 2019, we welcomed 26 new officers to the ranks of our law enforcement community and have an additional 48 recruits entering the academy this week. We continue to work closely with our federal partners to supplement the ranks of our local law enforcement and with U.S. Attorney Gretchen Shappert to ensure our best efforts to remove violent offenders from our streets.

But reducing crime in the Territory involves more than law enforcement. It involves empowering our young people and creating disincentives to a life of crime. It involves enriching our families and building up our communities and continuing our commitment to targeted prevention and behavioral support programs.

There is no stability without assuring that our people have access and the means to pay for health care. In the last four years alone, the number of Medicaid participants grew from 14,000 to 29,000.

The Administration testified before Congress three times last year, in our effort to rectify the Medicaid Fiscal Cliff. I also met with White House Administration officials and both Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer to impress on them the urgency of this matter.

Not doing so would have resulted in the loss of healthcare services for many of the 29,000 Medicaid members. The proposed legislation will provide the Territory with \$126 million for Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021 and increase the federal match rate from 55 percent to 83 percent. This is truly a historical moment, given that the Medicaid match rate has remained unchanged for more than a decade.

Thanks to the collaborative efforts of my office, the Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett and United States Senators Mike Crapo, Joe Manchin and Lisa Murkowski, we were successful in averting the Medicaid Fiscal Cliff for us and our sister territories in the Union.

Just weeks into our Administration, I issued an Executive Order declaring a mental health emergency in our community from the lingering effects of the 2017 hurricanes and the scarcity of behavioral health resources.

The Executive Order called on the Department of Health to expedite the recruitment of behavioral health professionals and called for the immediate deployment of providers from the Public Health Services Commissioner Corps and other federal programs.

Since then, we have taken several definitive steps to address our mental health challenges. The Department of Health has re-established the Behavioral Health Alcoholism and Drug Dependency Services Council.

We hired Vernita Bicette as the Territorial Director of Mental Health and Deputy Commissioner Renan Steele, who is a Mental Health Specialist, returning home from abroad. We re-opened the behavioral health “Clubhouse” on St. Croix as a facility to provide wrap-around services for individuals with behavioral health issues. The “Clubhouse” currently provides group and individual assessments, therapeutic sessions, career coaching and art therapy. Outpatient services are provided in both districts at the Behavioral Health Alcoholism and Drug Dependency clinics.

We have reopened the Eldra Schulerbrandt Long Term Care Residential Behavioral Health Facility on St. Thomas and are currently providing residential services for several patients from St. Croix.

Earlier today, we submitted for the consideration of this body, The Virgin Islands Mental Health, and Disabilities Act. It is the first comprehensive bill that addresses behavioral health challenges and mental health disorders experienced by people in our community.

Thank you, Judge Willocks, Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion and your team for partnering with us to address the crisis of mental health in the territory.

But as we address this crisis, we must also confront the very real nexus between mental health and homelessness. As of January 2018, there were almost 500 people in the Virgin Islands experiencing homelessness on any given day.

This past year, our Administration began placing the homeless from our streets into care facilities. The Bryan-Roach Administration also re-established the Interagency Council on Homelessness, led by Human Services Commissioner Kimberly Causey Gomez and Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority Executive Director Daryl Griffith.

Through this collaboration, we have begun removing homeless individuals from our streets and connecting them to the health and social services that they deserve. We have begun to identify locations for temporary supportive housing for those experiencing homelessness and have recently finalized the purchase of the Villa Morales property on St. Croix. This acquisition follows the purchase of the former Kronegade Inn in Christiansted, and we are currently looking at properties for locations in this district.

Housing and mental health services are the keys to addressing the needs of people experiencing homelessness, and for the first time, we are putting significant resources to work to address these basic needs.

Our Administration is dedicated not only to eradicating homelessness in our community, but also to giving every opportunity to people living in poverty who have far too few options. President Barack Obama understood that and raised the amount of compensation for the Earned Income Tax Credit to give folks that chance. Over 40 percent of tax returns are a result of that benefit, and withholding the payment is a travesty and an impediment to their progress. It is that simple.

The Bryan-Roach Administration wants to ensure that refunds are issued on time as a routine course of business. We have committed to ending the longstanding backlog of refunds owed to taxpayers. Taxpayers should be as confident that their government will pay them when they are owed as they are that we will collect from those who owe the government.

In 2019, the Department of Finance issued 25,227 refund checks totaling approximately \$64 million. We reduced our spending to pay your tax refunds. This completes the payout of eligible 2016 refunds for those taxpayers who filed on time. Included in this sum was \$22.7 million owed in eligible refunds for Tax Year 2017.

We are committed to meeting our mandate and adding another \$40 million in payouts. If we are diligent in this effort, we can finally get caught up on tax refunds by the end of this calendar year. And once we have done that, we will make sure we pay the \$10 million set-aside for retroactive wages owed to retirees.

We look forward to the cooperation of this body in helping us get there and your continued support in helping the Government stay current in its obligations owed to tax filers. Thank you to Finance Commissioner Kirk Callwood and BIR Director Joel Lee and both of their staffs for their assistance in making 2019 financially brighter for taxpayers and local businesses as more money circulating in our community results in a boost to our local economy.

The priorities for our recovery and emergence into a new Virgin Islands are hospitals, schools, roads, housing, and most certainly, WAPA. In the last three weeks alone, the Bryan-Roach Administration has secured over \$1 billion toward that end. Our government's progress in recovering from the devastation of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, although admittedly slower than I would like and frustratingly complicated with federal bureaucratic red tape, remains on track.

We have built the capacity within the Office of Disaster Recovery to manage the funding and associated projects through internal staff and third-party project managers. We have also put in place the appropriate controls to avoid expending funds without the necessary documentation, because we do not want to have to pay back a dime.

We have identified our top 100 priority projects. You may ask how it is that we can have 100 projects, and they all still be priorities. The reality is that this is less than 10 percent of the 1,500 project worksheets that we have for FEMA. Our mandate requires that we deliver on at least \$400 million in capital projects every year for the next 10 years just to keep pace. In the history of the Virgin Islands, this level of capital investment is unprecedented.

The Government of the Virgin Islands is working to secure more than \$8 billion in federal recovery aid through various programs over the next few years. This funding is not sitting in the local government's coffers; we are required to justify the need for every dollar.

Most of these resources are being delivered through four main federal programs – FEMA Public Assistance, FEMA Hazard Mitigation, the Federal Highway Emergency Relief Program and the HUD Community Development Block Grant for Disaster Recovery.

We have not wavered in our commitment to ensure that this funding comes to the territory.

Through consistent lobbying efforts and meeting with Delegate Plaskett and officials from FEMA, HUD, other federal agencies and congressional representatives, we have been able to secure tremendous opportunities to maximize funds to rebuild our beloved Virgin Islands.

The Territory has been awarded \$1.9 billion of the CDBG-DR grant funds, which has been divided into four tranches. We have received \$242 million of Tranche 1 funds, which will be used for housing programs, the electrical system and various economic revitalization projects, such as workforce training and port dredging.

While the VIHFA's Tranche 2 Action Plan was approved by HUD since March of 2019, the \$779 million in funding was only made available to the Territory on December 31st. Despite the abundance of concern, we were successful in not being lumped in with Puerto Rico. We met with HUD Secretary Ben Carson and HUD Undersecretary David Woll on several occasions to expedite the approvals, and after careful review, we have signed it.

Tranche 3's Action Plan is due to HUD on April 6, 2020. We continue our track record of excellence and expect to receive HUD approval of the Action Plan after submission.

Through our continuing efforts, we have secured an estimated 549 million dollars of other disaster-related funds for the territory. In total, out of the \$8 billion that the territory is expected to

receive, \$3.6 billion or 45 percent, has been made available for spending.

We will continue to work with our federal partners and local agencies to ensure that all additional eligible funding becomes available in a timely manner. This will result in modernized schools, well-equipped hospitals, resilient roadways and a reliable electrical grid.

Thank you to Office of Disaster Recovery Director Adrienne Williams-Octalien and her staff for the diligence they have demonstrated in overseeing the progress of our recovery.

The repair and reconstruction of our healthcare facilities are of utmost importance to our Administration. Most pressing is the completion of the temporary facility at the Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital. Conditions at the Luis Hospital were less than ideal before the storms and have only been exacerbated since then. Unfortunately, the construction of the temporary facility has experienced significant delays, caused in large part by poor decisions made by the previous administration in the immediate aftermath of the storms.

While the temporary modular structures have been built at the Luis Hospital, the required furnishings and equipment were excluded. The good news is that through the hard work of Acting Chief Executive Officer Dyma Williams and her team, we have secured \$26 million, and a supplemental contract was awarded for completing the temporary facility.

While pursuing the opening of the temporary hospital, we have begun our efforts to construct the new permanent hospital. In May of last year, FEMA officially determined that the damages to Juan F. Luis Hospital were significant enough to meet the threshold for complete demolition and replacement of the existing structure. Just last month, we secured \$10 million from FEMA to design the rebuild of the permanent hospital. The Luis Hospital staff is currently drafting the solicitation for architectural and engineering services to initiate the design process.

Currently, we are awaiting approval from FEMA to proceed with a phased reconstruction process for the Roy Lester Schneider Hospital on St. Thomas. A plan has also been developed to expand the facility to incorporate the Department of Health and the Department of Human Services as a temporary location for their operations.

Comprehensive damage assessments of the Charlotte Kimelman Cancer Institute and the Myrah Keating Smith Community Health Center have been completed and submitted to FEMA for approval. The staff will issue a Request for Proposals to begin architectural design on both facilities.

The Charlotte Kimelman Cancer Institute is a top priority for our Administration. Virgin Islanders diagnosed with cancer should not have the added burden of traveling overseas to receive proper medical attention. Our Administration intends to approach the rebuild of these healthcare facilities comprehensively and synchronize the rebuilding efforts across the districts and ensure that best practices are implemented across the board.

Join me in thanking Dr. Bernard Wheatley for his many years of dedicated service to the Schneider Regional Medical Center, and we bid him a fond farewell and best wishes on his retirement.

The hurricanes of 2017 destroyed Julius E. Sprauve School on St. John, Arthur A. Richards Junior High School on St. Croix, as well as the Addelita Cancryn Junior High School and the Curriculum Center right here on St. Thomas. Every other educational facility sustained some form of damage, and several campuses contained buildings that were so severely damaged that they needed to be shuttered.

We are currently developing an educational facilities master plan with community input and the assistance of the New Schools Construction Advisory Board. The first round of public open houses was held in October on all three islands to garner the support and the input of both internal

and external stakeholders. The advisory board has proposed industry standards that have been endorsed by the American Institute of Architects. The targeted goal for completion of the master plan is June of this year.

Funding has been identified to begin the demolition of several sites and start the design process for the new structures, starting with Charlotte Amalie High School. I want to thank this body for approving the line of credit for the demolition of this school and ask that they make the necessary amendments to the legislation so that we have access to these funds.

Preparations will be made to relocate the Raphael O. Wheatley Skills Center to a portion of the Gladys Abraham School site, thereby allowing students from Building C at Charlotte Amalie High School to move into a renovated Wheatley Skills Center site. Structurally compromised buildings at Charlotte Amalie High School will be demolished. As a student who attended Charlotte Amalie High School in the 1980s, I am sad to see its current state, but under this Administration, it will be returned to its full glory.

In addition to that campus, the existing Arthur A. Richards Junior High School is also slated for demolition. The current campus of the Evelyn Williams School in Estate Paradise has been identified as the future location of the Arthur Richards K through 8 school and, therefore, will require demolition as well.

Design will begin later this year for the modernization of several schools to include St. Croix's Claude O. Markoe School and Yvonne E. Milliner Bowsky on St. Thomas. Design will also begin on the much-anticipated new Julius E. Sprauve K through 12 campus on St. John. This new facility will eliminate high school students residing on St. John having to travel by ferry to St. Thomas to attend school. Both the federal and local governments have finally agreed on a site for the new school and are in negotiations for a land swap.

As we manage these transitions and rebuild the physical footprint of the Virgin Islands public school system, the safety and comfort of our students and faculty remain our utmost concern. We continue to plan and execute projects to maintain our existing school sites and the temporary modular facilities. With the help of the Legislature, we have set aside over \$5 million to help maintain and temporarily repair our ailing education infrastructure. We thank Commissioner of Education Racquel Berry Benjamin, Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington and their very capable staff for their support as these transitions occur. Read full address [here](#).