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Bryan Announces Two-Year Budget With \$25 Million in Retro Payments, \$16 Million For Wage Increases; Says \$40 Million Budget Gap Can be Bridged Through Legalized Marijuana

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“Framing our Financial Future” is the theme of the Bryan administration's budget covering fiscal years 2023 and 2024. The budget, which was submitted to the 34th Legislature Tuesday afternoon, among other things provides \$16 million for public employees' wage increases and funding for about 1,200 vacancies across all government agencies.

However, there is a \$40 million budget gap and Governor Albert Bryan believes the approval of legislation making marijuana use for adults legal in the Virgin Islands would generate significant revenue. Mr. Bryan, speaking during the administration's weekly press briefing called on Senator

Janelle Sarauw, who has authorship of the measure, to act on the legislation.

“We have included legislation to approve adult-use cannabis. It is just totally ridiculous now how long Senator Sarauw has been holding our bill in the Legislature. Call her and tell her why you holding up this cannabis use legislation,” Mr. Bryan suggested to residents.

“We need to get it done so we will be calling the Legislature into special session and give them plenty of time to think about it. We have a \$40 million funding gap this year that we need to fill with different types of funding resources,” he said.

The governor said it's been three years since the measure was presented to the Senate. “We need to get it through the Legislature so we can get some money,” he said.

The budget provides members of the Legislature with various fiscal measures for 2023 and 2024. “For us it is essential and it gives the lawmakers a good look at what we have coming up,” Mr. Bryan stated.

“I think this is so important because we are approaching a point here where, yes we are stronger than ever but we have to make sure that we don't tip over on that point where we create so much expense for our government that we can't handle it once we get over the Covid-19 recovery and spending from the hurricanes,” the governor said while explaining that his administration needs to be able to have a manageable budget so that it would never have to go through an 8 percent reduction similar to what happened during the de Jongh administration.

“So while we are very optimistic about our future, framing our financial future is making sure we do so in a responsible way because we are projecting growth in all five major revenue categories — Personal Income Tax, Corporate Income Tax, Real Property Tax, Gross Receipt Tax, and Excise Tax,” he said.

“We expect all of them to go up because the strength of these revenue collections has allowed us to propose a budget plan that addresses several critical expenditure areas. So the highlight of this budget is what we have been able to do because of financial management,” Governor Bryan said.

These commitments include \$16 million for public employee wage increases; funding for 1,200 vacancies across all government, and \$2 million to fund the Office of Disaster Recovery. “We are moving into a point now where in our recovery there will be more and more professionals working for us directly to manage these schools that are coming on, the hospitals that are coming on,” the governor said while admitting that some of these positions are above the capacity of these agencies.

Also included in the budget is \$225,000 for continuous support for the Office of Gun Violence Prevention; \$1.8 million for the expansion of [GVI fellows](#); an additional \$2 million for the Supreme Court of the Virgin Islands; and \$5 million for road maintenance to be placed in a trust fund. “The transportation trust never had any money in it for years. We are putting money in there now so that we can actually start a road repair program,” he said.

There is also \$25 million in retroactive wages owed to retirees. Mr. Bryan said that this is a 30-year-old debt that the Bryan/Roach Administration is paying.

The government has also allocated \$5 million to be deposited into a rainy-day fund. “We have built significant cash reserve now; never had this before in the Virgin Islands... this administration has put away \$5 million for the last couple years,” said the governor as he explained the purpose of the rainy-day fund.

