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The Biggest Stories of 2022, Part 1

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Staff Consortium **December 26, 2022**

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A collage of pictures representing some of the stories that significantly impacted the USVI in 2022.

As 2022 draws to an end, the V.I. Consortium is putting several lists of the year's biggest stories together.

The stories will be published in no particular order, as the purpose of the series is to simply highlight the biggest moments of the year in the USVI, not particularly by order of impact.

Steven Payne Sr. Saga

Exclusive reporting by the V.I. Consortium led to the [expulsion of Senator Steven Payne Sr.](#) from the 34th Legislature in July, after an allegation of sexual harassment by one of Mr. Payne's then-

staffers snowballed into accusations by three women, the last, [from Steffi Emilien](#), being the most damning.

Here are some other big stories

[Triple Homicide Rocks St. Croix \(July 26\)](#)

Three men were killed on St. Croix in La Grande Princesse on July 26 after sustaining multiple gunshot wounds during a nighttime shooting in the vicinity of a liquor store called Wa U Feel Like and the Titan Service Station, according to the V.I. Police Department. It was the only triple-homicide in the USVI in 2022.

[Waste Haulers Block Path to Anguilla in Protest of Owed Funds](#)

Four major waste haulers on St. Croix took unprecedented action on July 6 when they staged a massive protest action, blocking entry to the Anguilla Landfill and deciding as a group to stop collecting waste throughout St. Croix until payments owed to them by the V.I. government are made in full. The government swiftly settled with the waste haulers by making partial payments.

[Michelle Smith Sets New Virgin Islands Record During 400m Hurdles at the U20 Championships in Colombia; Makes it to Finals](#)

Michelle Smith, who had been recently treated to a grand welcome on St. Croix after her stunning, gold-winning performances on the mainland in June, [on August 3rd set a new Virgin Islands National Junior record](#) of 57.83 in the Semi-Final of the 400m Hurdles at the World Athletic U20 Championships in Cali, Colombia.

[Announcement of Impending Modernization of Airports](#)

The V.I. Port Authority Governing Board in September authorized a public/private partnership to expand and modernize the Cyril E. King Airport in St. Thomas and the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport on St Croix.

While VIPA Executive Director Carlton Dowe told the Consortium that the authority will be leasing to whichever company/companies are successful, he emphasized that the Port Authority will retain full ownership of both airports.

[VIPD Patrol Officers Now Wearing Body Cameras](#)

The V.I. Police Department in July announced the launch of the first phase of its Body-Worn Camera Program that will equip the VIPD Patrol Officers with the use of BWCs for law enforcement operations. The deployment will allow officers to record enforcement and investigative encounters between the police and the public, the department said, which added that the cameras will provide an objective record of encounters, simplify review of events by supervisors, and improve accountability.

[Housing Authority Breaks Ground on \\$116.7 Million Rehabilitation of Walter I.M. Hodge Pavilion Housing Community](#)

The V.I. Housing Authority along with MDG Design + Construction in June held a groundbreaking ceremony for construction of the \$116.7 million rehabilitation of Walter I.M. Hodge Pavilion, a 248-unit affordable housing development in St. Croix. The U.S. Dept. of

Housing and Urban Development (HUD) recently provided \$73 million toward the project.

[West Indies Petroleum Buys Limetree Bay Refinery](#)

The Limetree Bay Refinery became the property of West Indies Petroleum and its partner, Port Hamilton Refining and Transportation LLP in late January after the companies made the final \$11.4 million of the \$62 million sale price of the auction-sold south shore facility. The facility has never been able to restart oil refining since the bid purchase was completed.

[Sargassum Inundates St. Croix Leads to State of Emergency Declaration](#)

Government House announced in July that Governor Albert Bryan issued an executive order declaring a state of emergency in the territory to mitigate the impact from the unusually high amounts of sargassum seaweed that was piling up on USVI shores and having a negative impact on water-production capabilities on St. Croix.

[Bryan Pays Out \\$288.8 Million in Tax Refunds](#)

The major milestone of coming current on tax refunds by paying out \$288.7 million was announced by Governor Albert Bryan during a press event on Sept. 19. "We have paid, believe it not, tax refunds as far back as 2001 — that's 22 years ago," Mr. Bryan said at the time. "And we continue to pay tax refunds from before as they may have been in audit or they may have been filed late. But regardless, we have been paying them out as quickly as they have been filed."

[Covid-19 Declared an Endemic in U.S. Virgin Islands](#)

The V.I. Dept. of Health said in May that the U.S. Virgin Islands entered the endemic stage in its efforts against Covid-19, an announcement that came with massive implications regarding how the Bryan administration manages the coronavirus moving forward.

[UVI Suffers Lowest Enrollment Levels in 40 Years](#)

The University of the Virgin Islands in August asked senators in the Committee on Finance to consider granting it a total budget funding of \$39.1 million for fiscal year 2023, to help support its operational costs which have been unfavorably impacted by low student enrollment and other external factors.

USVI President Dr. David Hall told lawmakers during a hearing that with just one week before school reopened, only 1,320 students had registered at the institution. It is a significant decline from the 2,400 students who attended UVI prior to the 2017 hurricane season. "The hurricanes took about 500 students from us; free tuition brought us back up the first year we implemented it but then the pandemic has eroded those numbers down to where we are," he said.

[Dept. of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin Resigns](#)

The resignation of Mrs. Berry-Benjamin on June 27, followed much debate about the department's performance during her time as commissioner.

From the outset of her tenure, the commissioner has faced opposition based on concerns over whether she could run the massive department. In February 2019, her nomination [was held in committee](#) by senators who expressed skepticism with her level of readiness. Her chances received a boost after Governor Bryan [publicly threw his weight](#) behind her. "I have full

confidence that Commissioner Berry-Benjamin, and our District Insular Superintendents, along with DOE's Operations team, our teachers and the rest of the DOE staff will ensure a safe and conducive school environment for our students this school year," the governor said, contending that the problems that plagued the education system were not caused by his administration, which was new at the time, and he reminded the public of the devastating effects of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

We'll have more big stories of 2022 in the coming days.

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