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Bryan Welcomes Illegal Immigrants to Fill Gap as EnVision Tomorrow, Other GVI Construction Projects Hamstrung By Labor Shortage

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Janeke Simon **January 30, 2023**

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The economic transformation of the USVI is being hindered by the lack of workers, particularly in construction.

This is not the first time Governor Albert Bryan Jr. has said that the absence of an adequate labor force in the sector is slowing the pace of large-scale projects, but during last week's exclusive interview with Consortium publisher Ernice Gilbert, the governor provided further context.

Since 2017, an influx of federal funds aimed at helping the territory rebuild its hurricane-ravaged infrastructure has spawned a frenzy of construction — the governor says over \$900 million of work was contracted out last year alone. This encompasses projects including new the Arthur

Richards K-8 School (\$242 million), and the Charles Harewood Memorial Hospital reconstruction, costed out at between \$160 million-\$180 million, according to Mr. Bryan.

All told, there has been \$12 billion in disaster recovery-related federal dollars allotted to the territory, of which almost half — \$5 billion — is currently available to spend, the governor said.

The problem is that as these years-long projects get underway, "there comes a point where you call critical mass...everybody is working, every contractor is working, then we start to stack," he said.

With an inadequate workforce as the limiting factor in the capacity of the government to get work done, Mr. Bryan says that he won't be scrutinizing too closely the status of people who arrive in the territory looking for an opportunity to benefit from the construction boom.

When Mr. Gilbert noted that migration from the Eastern Caribbean was being hindered due to visa requirements, Governor Bryan clarified. "They can't come legally if they don't have visas," Mr. Bryan noted, before offering a pragmatic approach. "Gaps fill," said the governor. "If there's money to be made anywhere, people will follow the money."

Governor Bryan foresees new undocumented workers coming in to fill the gaps left in the private sector as government construction projects employ more and more legal workers. "I don't have any problem with that," said Mr. Bryan. "It's going to happen, regardless of what we do," even though the government "would like to have it done legally."

Given the inability of government to marshal a large enough labor force to execute fast enough, Mr. Bryan does not believe the territory can get through the planned \$800 million in construction spending annually, "but we're going to try."

His strategy is to utilize money from the U.S. Housing & Urban Development Community Development Block Grant (HUD-CDBG) program as a priority, as that significant pool of funds is time-limited.

Another challenge for the territory is that these funding allocations come with a requirement for local government to come up with approximately 10 percent of the total sum — in the case of the Virgin Islands, that's approximately \$1.2 billion in matching funds that the governor says the territory just doesn't have right now. As a result, Mr. Bryan says he's going to press the U.S. Congress, through his own efforts as well as those of Congressional Delegate Stacey Plaskett, to waive the matching requirement either overall, or for major individual projects in the territory.

The labor crunch in the USVI is also affecting programs like EnVIision Tomorrow, slowing progress almost to a crawl, the governor explained. The initial allocation of \$12 million annually which was supposed to result in the construction of 50 homes per year has been increased to \$25 million — however the money has not translated into work on the ground.

"When is the last time we built 50 homes in a year in the Virgin Islands?" Governor Bryan asked. "When was the last time we built 50 homes in the Virgin Islands with everything else building at the same time?"

"If the hospital is building, if the schools are building, if we still have other private sector projects, if the refinery starts, how many people are going to be around to build homes?"

Mr. Bryan explained that the EnVision Program, initiated under the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), completed repairs on 1800 homes. The Mapp administration, said the governor, proposed that FEMA also include complete rebuilds of houses that were too badly damaged to salvage. That proposal, made when there were workers available in the territory, was rejected by FEMA more than once, Governor Bryan said. By the time the project was re-routed through HUD, a year had passed and the pool of workers had dried up.

"We do not" necessarily have a proper answer for this "huge" labor shortage problem, Governor Bryan admitted.

"The workforce development problem is a serious problem in St. Croix, and it's a diabolical one on St. Thomas and St. John."

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