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BVI Looking to Preserve its Culture and Heritage as it Develops 'Vision 2036'

Caribbean / **Published On March 03, 2023 07:33 AM /**

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Oil drum grills on Anegada, BVI. By. GETTY IMAGES

Public consultations continue in the British Virgin Islands as the territory seeks to establish a Culture and Heritage Policy and Strategy, intended to crystallize a unique Virgin Islands national and cultural identity rooted in the heritage of the territory.

In a press statement on Wednesday 15 February, Premier Dr. Natalio D. Wheatley, who also holds the Culture portfolio, said public consultations for the Virgin Islands National Sustainable Development Plan – Vision 2036 revealed that one of the main areas of concern for the people of the BVI was "protecting national identity, fostering cultural integration, heritage, cultural education and nation building."

Armed with those areas of focus, Mr. Wheatley said the Department of Culture turned to the public again to participate in the development of the Virgin Islands Culture and Heritage Policy and Strategy, a mechanism that he said "will ensure that the policy is reflective of a wide range of views and ideas."

According to the premier, the creation of the Culture and Heritage Policy and Strategy is an important milestone for the BVI and its people in charting a sustainable future for the current and future British Virgin Islanders, which he says was a goal of the territory's ancestors.

He added that the policy and strategy document is necessary for identifying goals as a people and will assist in remaining focused, as it will quickly highlight areas for improvement.

"In the [British] Virgin Islands, culture and heritage are also integral to our economy. Our heritage sites, cultural traditions, food, music and our warm hospitable personality are part of our tourism product and give us a competitive advantage in that highly competitive industry... Tourism is the leading contributor to real economic activity and employment. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to protect our heritage sites and our intangible heritage, such as our old time sayings and stories, to support and develop our talent in all the art forms, and to unlock the full economic potential of our cultural industries," reads the premier's message in the draft for the policy, which was made public on February 14, 2023 for public consultation.

During Tuesday's "Public Eye" program, the premier said the formulation of the policy would contribute to the development plan the government has for the territory.

"This is a very important part of our nation building exercise... As you know, just yesterday we launched our National Sustainable Development Plan - Vision 2036, and as we build on our national sustainable development plan, our culture, we have to recognize culture is a very important aspect of that... because of course as the cliché goes 'you can't know where you're going unless you know where you came from. In a similar respect, you can't really chart a course into the future unless you examine and have a thorough understanding of who you are and who you have been," Mr. Wheatley explained.

Dr. Katherine Smith, director of culture said authorities considered two main angles when they developed the draft policy and strategy.

"When we really looked at it, the responsibilities for culture and heritage are fragmented... they actually fall across multiple stakeholders and so it became clear that now it's really necessary for everyone to really work together in a cohesive manner, under a coordinated policy and strategy."

She added the Department of Culture took the lead and met with various stakeholders on the policy. Ms. Smith called the sessions "promising, enriching, informative and instructive." She said some of the implementation methods suggested included "integrating our culture and heritage throughout the education sector, pre-primary to tertiary."

Within the policy draft, the government promised to "place special emphasis on integrating culture and heritage throughout the education sector."

Some of the strategies listed toward this goal included developing working relationships and programs with the Education Ministry and public and private education sectors, integrating the territory's culture, arts and heritage into the national schools curriculum at all levels, including the education sector in national commemorative and cultural events and encouraging cultural activities and clubs in schools.

Callers to the Public Eye program shared their own perspectives on how honor for and awareness of the territory's rich heritage and culture could be more tightly interwoven into everyday life. One suggestion was to erect a billboard bearing the names of athletes who earn gold medals in the Olympics, in an effort to encourage young athletes. The establishment of a national Fungi band was also suggested as a way to ensure that the territory's traditional music continued to thrive.

When asked on Tuesday how he is going to ensure the plans and vision enshrined in the final policy document are effectively implemented, Mr. Wheatley said, "A lot of times we do these policies and they sit on the shelf and they gather dust, but of course the main implementing agency has to be the Department of Culture... but so many other partner agencies have to take on this policy and really make it their own... and of course we've been speaking about working in silos, we can't afford to do that anymore."

Included in the draft strategies for implementing the policy were the development of relationships with the Health Ministry and other agencies to research and document traditional knowledge of medicinal plants and remedies, researching and documenting natural health practices such as midwifery, and researching and documenting traditional food preparation methods and more to address health in the territory.

In the policy draft, the government also promises to prioritize "restructuring, staffing, and training of the Department of Culture, ensuring that it is properly resourced and able to lead the coordinated policy making, strategic planning and implementation required of culture and heritage policy."

This would be done through collaboration with the H. Laverty Stouff Community College to "develop and expand its program of cultural offerings, especially in the areas of certificates, diplomas, and post graduate certification in the creative and cultural arts, heritage and cultural management, entrepreneurship and, cultural industry development."

The government also intends to boost the Culture Department through training program to develop technical capacity in the department. It proposes the reclassification of positions in the department and to streamline the department so that it efficiently serves its purpose.

Further, in a bid to protect the environment while preserving traditional knowledge and remaining culturally sensitive, the government drafted plans in the policy to "ensure that cultural considerations are considered while implementing environmental initiatives."

Part of this includes researching and documenting traditional agricultural and fishing practices, and other sustainable traditions such as recycling and ensuring that they are integrated into modern initiatives."

The government also promises to consider the role of the family in the socio-cultural development of the BVI. "The Government of [British] the Virgin Islands will examine the shifting socio-cultural environment regarding the family structure, promoting traditional methods that lead to increased personal and community wellbeing," the policy draft reads.

It also promises to recognize how important excellence in sports is to national pride and the impact sports has on the territory's social and cultural life.

The policy draft included several cultural aspects and National symbols indigenous to the [British] Virgin Islands, including the territorial song, badge, tree, flower, dish, music, colors and more, for the public's feedback, corrections or additions.

The BVI government has given itself a three-month period to establish an implementation framework and timeline for the five-year Culture and Heritage Policy and Strategy for the period 2023-2028.

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