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Territory-Wide Plan for Abandoned Properties Unveiled by Governor Bryan

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Abandoned property. By. GETTY IMAGES

Governor Albert Bryan on Wednesday unveiled a plan to deal with abandoned and derelict properties in the territory. The action comes via legislation that will need approval from the territory's legislative branch, which the governor hopes will address the longstanding problem.

“What we're doing is we're proposing a draft piece of legislation that will ... provide a mechanism to transform and rehabilitate all of these properties,” Governor Bryan announced. “It will address substandard, deteriorating properties that present a public nuisance under a public safety hazard, and will allow the appointment of a conservator to oversee the rehabilitation of these properties throughout the place. This person will also jumpstart the development and contribute to the

economic health of the territory as a whole."

Mr. Bryan explained the plan as conceptualized. "...We have to establish what is the working definition for abandoned property as it pertains to property located in the Virgin Islands. The determination of this so far will be based on facts of each situation, and will include considerations such as whether the homeowner is presently in possession of the property, or whether it's in probate ... and whether this property is actually in use in any way," he outlined as the bill's initial purpose. "The measure's second purpose is to provide an expedient, fair and equitable process for appointing someone who will represent the owner of the property and get it back to where it needs to be."

That individual, called the conservator, would be "empowered to have the authority to take possession of the property or the abandoned building," according to the governor. They would then invest their funds to "bring the property up to snuff with building codes and obtain necessary permits for all the improvement, all of which will be overseen by a judge in the judicial branch."

The conservatorship program is not meant to dispossess property owners, the governor reassured. "This is not some plan to take property away from Virgin Island and Virgin Islanders and local families. But it is one to preserve properties for Virgin Islanders and to revitalize our towns and our communities," he said. "The conservator is taking control of the property; the title and the legal ownership of the property would remain with the family, individual organization, whatever it was before. The original owner would retain all the legal rights to that property."

The conservator, Mr. Bryan explained, would be assigned responsibility for rehabilitating the distressed property and in exchange, that individual or entity would keep a portion of the revenue made from the property over the life of the conservatorship, with the homeowner pocketing their share of the profits.

Questions about whether such a conservatorship could be compelled by the courts in the face of reluctant or un-cooperative homeowners were not answered as of press time, however Governor Bryan promised a comprehensive series of public meetings to discuss the measure and obtain feedback from the citizenry.

"We'll be having a town hall meeting, one in St. Thomas/St. John district, one in St. Croix," said Mr. Bryan. "If we feel like we didn't get enough information, or there's more to be heard, of course, we will be holding more before we get to a final place where we can send this to the Legislature, hopefully with your support, and get it passed."

Homeowners whose properties may not qualify for the conservatorship program, but who may not have the requisite funds to develop their own properties may qualify for government grants which are scheduled to be rolled out. The rehabilitation programs are part of a wider anti-crime initiative, said Governor Bryan, which also includes "work[ing] with the neighborhoods to increase lighting, put in parking spaces, put sidewalks, put in intranet — the things that will develop the community and make people want to live there."