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Residents Share Concerns About Land Grabs, Malicious Conservators in First Public Meeting To Discuss Derelict Buildings Policy

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On Monday night, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. and members of his executive team gathered in the auditorium of the Charlotte Amalie High School to discuss with members of the public his plan to deal with [derelict and abandoned buildings](#) in the territory.

According to Government House Chief of Staff Karl Knight, the courts would play an integral role in the process. Owners could voluntarily seek a conservatorship agreement should they find themselves unable to personally finance the renovation, repair or demolition of a property deemed derelict or abandoned. For those properties where ownership is in dispute, in question, or where owners are unwilling to address the conditions of the property, a third party can make a case to the court that a conservatorship needs to be imposed.

A conservator, Mr. Knight explained, must present a plan that includes a proposed scope of work and a financing plan that includes costing and revenue projections. Once the court approves, the conservator will then have a finite timeframe within which to execute the plan. “If you fulfill the purposes of the conservatorship...your conservatorship is terminated and the interest of that property reverts fully to the owners of record,” he explained. The conservatorship can also be terminated early, either if the property owner can prove to the court that they now have the resources and the will to make the appropriate remedies to the property themselves, or if the court finds that the conservator is not fulfilling their duties towards the property owner – that is to appropriately remediate the derelict property.

Conservators would be paid administrative fees out of federal grant funds to secure their services on behalf of the property owner, capped by the court to prevent profiteering. Proposed regulations include requiring the entity be a nonprofit that has been in existence for at least a year, with focus in community development, blight remediation, affordable housing and related fields. Noting that the proposal was subject to change, Governor Bryan responded to a resident’s concern by agreeing to consider a 5-year minimum lifespan for an organization to be considered for conservatorship. Conservators can then hire developers to do the necessary work.

“What we would really love to see is a nonprofit or community organization form a housing initiative, where they’re rehabbing these buildings, employing young people in the community to do them, selling their homes, and then reinvesting on buying another one,” said Governor Bryan, noting that the Economic Development Authority (EDA) is currently working on a project with one property on St. Croix as a sort of proof of concept. “You’re creating jobs, you’re adding to the tax roll, you’re housing people – [a] trifecta of greatness.”

All fees and profits are set out and capped by the court, with any revenue in excess of those amounts flowing to the property owner.

One resident asked whether this program would apply to government property as well, specifically those in downtown Charlotte Amalie. “They are just as ugly,” she declared.

Governor Bryan concurred. “The government is one of the abusers of the abandoned and derelict,” he said. “So yes, we plan to do our buildings as well.” He noted that while there is available funding from Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to create affordable housing, other desired projects such as museums will need to find other sources of funds. He noted that approval to demolish some of the buildings for parking would have to be sought from the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC). “Y’all know they’re my favorite people,” he [joked](#), prompting laughter from the audience.

Mr. Knight expanded on the plan to address government-owned derelict buildings by articulating an iterative approach. “What it’s probably going to look like as a practical approach is the government targeting specific areas and making sure it takes care of its responsibility in those areas,” he explained. “And once it’s done that and incentivized the private sector to join suit, move on to another high priority area and keep doing so until one day, we have our towns and neighborhoods looking the way we want them to look.”

In response to a query about the Michelle Motel in St. Thomas, an eyesore for the surrounding area, Governor Bryan disclosed that authorities were actively seeking a developer to partner with in getting the building demolished. Two prospective developers have expressed interest, he said. “We’ve essentially told them and everybody else, we will give you the property if you will take down the building...we’re waiting for them to get back to us,” the governor said, explaining that

the structure, located in a floodplain, does not qualify for federal funding to rehabilitate it or demolish it to rebuild. “That’s what’s been the problem,” he noted. Later on in the meeting, he estimated that it would cost as much as \$2 million to demolish the motel, something that could be appropriated by lawmakers. “You’ve got a couple of them in here,” the governor pointed out.

Mr. Bryan returned to the topic of historic preservation following another resident’s complaints about the onerous regulatory burdens imposed by the HPC, promising that reform of the commission’s code would be addressed following the passage of the legislation dealing with abandoned properties. “I heard a lot of senators talk about it, but we haven’t really seen legislation,” he said. “Our historic preservation strategy has failed. Our buildings are falling down, it looks terrible.” Responding to someone speaking in defense of the HPC, Mr. Bryan reiterated his opinion of the territory’s policy on the subject. “Why I say our historic preservation policy has failed, is because we tried to save everything....Our buildings are falling down, it looks terrible. We got to make a decision. What are we going to save? And what are we going to sacrifice in order to save it?”

He noted that home pricing had skyrocketed, placing even “normal homes” out of many people’s reach. “We’re not saying don’t develop them in a historic way, I don’t want to make Savan look like downtown Atlanta. But certainly, I think we’re gonna have to make concessions,” Governor Bryan said.

Both Mr. Bryan and Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach sought to downplay the idea of eminent domain coming into effect, with the governor saying that he believes that route would take a lot longer and “aggravate the community.” Mr. Roach noted that the use of eminent domain is “the most aggressive action that the government can take against a property owner.” Concerns about native Virgin Islanders becoming victims of a land grab by moneyed interests from the mainland were also allayed by the governor and his lieutenant. Mr. Roach pointed out that the failure of responsible agencies to respond swiftly in the aftermath of the hurricane may incentivize frustrated homeowners to respond to offers to purchase, but made it clear that forced sales would not be included as a part of this program.

After over 90 minutes, the [first of two](#) scheduled meetings closed with Governor Bryan encouraging residents to participate in the discussion surrounding the abandoned buildings policy by sending in their suggestions to a dedicated website which will be live soon, according to Mr. Knight. As he gave his final remarks, the governor sought to reassure residents. “They’re hard decisions and they’re scary decisions, because you have to trust that the people that you elected are going to do right by you,” he acknowledged. “This is going through an incredible vetting process before it even sees the light of day and is able to be published.”