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Complaints Over Painful Bottlenecks In Homeownership Process Dominate Townhall on VIHA Annual Plan

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USVI residents affected by housing crisis participated in a town hall-style Senate meeting on Wednesday, Aug. 30, 2023. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

In a town-hall meeting hosted by the Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications on Wednesday evening, residents of the Virgin Islands voiced their frustrations and concerns about the bottlenecks and obstacles they face in transitioning from public housing to homeownership.

The meeting was designed to discuss the V.I. Housing Authority's 2024 annual plan and allowed residents to directly address their grievances, many of which highlighted systemic issues making

homeownership painfully difficult to attain.

Committee Chair Marvin Blyden, in his opening remarks, addressed the move, which he said many might find unusual. “Why, you may ask, is the Committee on Housing doing this? After all, this is a housing plan, not the Legislature’s. The short answer to that – I believe this is a way to assist the Housing Authority, and the public, in developing a plan that best meets the needs of our people,” he said.

Many of the questions and concerns of the evening came from the Williams Delight community, members of which were particularly vocal about their seeming inability, after years of effort, to transition from being residents of public housing to homeowners

One member of the Williams Delight Resident Council, Ms. Maynard, wanted to know whether any special consideration would be given to Williams Delight residents who have been on a waiting list to purchase their homes for up to a decade in some instances. She was concerned that because they, over the years, have become what authorities would deem “over-income”, they would be in danger of losing their homes under a new [federal policy](#), despite it being no fault of theirs that they are still tenants of the VIHA.

Chief Operating Officer Lydia Pelle noted that only 45 people are currently considered “over-income”, and “the majority of those people are not at Williams Delight.” While she expressed her belief that participation in a home ownership program should technically shield residents from the new requirements, she noted that VIHA would “have to vet that with HUD” to be certain. However, Ms. Pelle did confirm that as per the new policy, these over-income families will be paying higher rents as of January 1, 2024, however nobody will be evicted. Meanwhile, Director of Asset Management Jimmy Farmer disclosed that some of the households in question are “making comfortably six figures.”

Williams Delight resident Simone James, meanwhile, shared her difficulties in being able to qualify for assistance programs that would enable her to purchase her home outright. She noted that her rent payments took up three-quarters of her sub-\$1000 salary, leaving her little to afford the necessities of life for herself and her three children. Her application for grant assistance to purchase her home was denied, she says, because of poor credit. However, she is confident that she can service a mortgage, as evidenced by her ability to meet her rent each month. “I’m telling you from my heart, this is what’s happening on the ground,” Ms. James shared. “And now you’re telling me I gotta go and see if I could get credit and pay banks and all of that?”

Ashel Belardo was the third resident of Williams Delight to speak about the difficulties of the homeownership process. “Just everybody has this story,” the resident councilmember asserted. “I am concerned with what’s really going on with the Virgin Islands Housing Authority,” she said, noting that she has been trying to navigate the purchasing process since 2013. “Three times I’ve went to lenders, got approved, and the windows got closed because of time. I am presently going through the process — time again.” Ms. Belardo says she is paying more than \$800 in rent, plus more for upkeep of her surroundings and that of the abandoned property next to her home. Her primary concern was what would happen to her and her disabled son if she does not get approved for homeownership in a timely manner.

Troy Mason, who owns a home in the private section of Williams Delight, spoke passionately in defense of the public housing community residents. He accused VIHA of not actually wanting to sell the homes, noting that only 3 or 4 homes a year have been turned over in the past decade. Mr. Mason expressed incredulity that residents who have been paying \$75,000 per year and more in

monthly rent would be denied approval to purchase property that at most costs less than half that amount. Unlike legislators who last week [voiced skepticism](#) over the idea of allowing residents to purchase their units “as is”, Mr. Mason urged VIHA to do just that, albeit protected from liability with carefully vetted contractual provisions.

Outside of Williams Delight, St. John resident Raven Phillips wondered whether an increase in minimum wage had been part of the conversation surrounding boosting the incomes of public housing community residents. Ms. Pelle thanked her for raising that point. “That’s not something that we as a Housing Authority have lobbied, but it’s something that our territorial and other officials can lobby.” She agreed that some people, though employed, “just don’t make enough money.” The VIHA COO, however, seemed reluctant to commit to joining the lobbying effort for an increased minimum wage, saying that the agency was “focused on making sure the individuals in our communities have more opportunities to increase their skill set to be more marketable in the employment area.”

Senator Marise James inquired whether long-time residents would receive consideration towards the purchase price, a question to which Ms. Pelle responded in the negative. However, Ms. Pelle did note that the VIHA was considering making direct loans to residents who can afford the payments but who do not qualify for other assistance programs. “There is discussion and a plan about having that option,” she disclosed.

A resident participating from St. Thomas directed everyone to the Virgin Islands Rent to Own Public Housing Conversion Program, Chapter 4 in the 2019 USVI Code, Title 21. Included in the statute is the stated policy to allow residents with the longest tenancies in public housing priority when it comes to purchasing units available through home ownership programs. It also provides a mechanism whereby prospective homebuyers can gain credit towards purchases by accumulating “sweat equity” in their rental units. He suggested that the challenges and difficulties being described by VIHA officials in getting home ownership programs flowing could be overcome by following the provisions already enacted into law during the 21st Legislature. Senator Blyden promised to do the necessary research into the prevailing legislation.

Meanwhile, Ms. Pelle reassured displaced residents of the Estate Tutu and Donoe High-Rise communities that they would have first right of return when the new structures are completed, in response to concerns from a resident who called the occupants of the Donoe public housing units a “family.” She told a resident of St. John who pointed out the lack of affordable public housing on the island that more vouchers would be issued to help residents afford the crippling rents. “Right now, construction of new housing is not in the plan for St. John,” for the next year, a circumstance the resident called unacceptable. Senator Blyden vowed to write formally to the VIHA to inquire what could be done on St. John, since residents there pay the highest taxes into government coffers.

An expansion of the Housing Choice Voucher Program is in progress across the territory, Mr. Krigger noted, to increase both the availability of vouchers and the availability of housing stock through increased participation of landlords. Some requirements will be relaxed to encourage participation, while the frequency of inspections will be increased to ensure quality standards are maintained, he explained. Additionally, voucher recipients would be able to use them to access rent-to-own programs in the future, he said.

All public comments and suggestions stemming from the extensive discussion, it was noted, would be compiled and forwarded to the VIHA, to inform the finalization of their plan for the next fiscal year. In that sense, the openness with which these residents of Williams Delight and elsewhere shared their personal struggles and challenges may prove to influence authorities to

expend more energy in ensuring that those who wish to transition from tenant to homeowner are able to do so after so many years. As Mr. Blyden noted in his opening remarks, the Virgin Islands, like the rest of the country, is “in the midst of a profound affordable housing crisis that severely impacts the quality of life for working families.” The lack of affordable housing, he declared, “cripples our effort to build and further develop our community,” as families will not stay in, or come to the territory, without “safe, sanitary and affordable housing.”

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