



| SOTTA

Legislature USVI

January 24, 2022 · 3.5 hours · gov

Source recording	https://youtu.be/BYI75gOk8uA
Status	This is a working transcript produced by machine from a recording of a public proceeding. It is a finding aid, not an official record of the Legislature.
Transcribed by	VI Update, using OpenAI Whisper large-v3-turbo, run locally. Not reviewed by a person.
Reliability	Automatic transcription, UNVERIFIED. Verify every quotation against the recording before relying on it. Speech recognition splits spoken digits and wraps figures mid-number, so a dollar amount, a vote count or a bill number can be wrong in a way that reads as correct. Speakers are not identified: automatic speaker labelling was measured unusable and removed.
Public record	The underlying proceeding is a public record of the Legislature of the Virgin Islands. 3 V.I.C. § 881(a) defines public records to include all records and documents of or belonging to this Territory or any branch of government, or any "department, board, council or committee of any branch of government" · which names legislative committees by category. § 881(b) gives every citizen the right to examine and copy such records, and the news media the right to publish them. (The open-meetings chapter, 1 V.I.C. § 254, does NOT reach the Legislature: § 253(b) expressly excludes it and its Standing and Special Committees. § 881 does, and it is § 881 that confers the right to copy and publish.) The Legislature broadcast this proceeding publicly itself. The source recording is not ours, is not hosted here, and remains with its publisher at the link above.
Rights	To what we added · the transcription, its arrangement and its description · we assert nothing. A verbatim transcript is mechanical rather than authored, so there is likely nothing in it to own; to the extent any copyright is nonetheless found to subsist, it is dedicated to the public domain under CC0 1.0. Please copy it, quote it, index it, train on it, republish it, mirror it, sell it. Redistribution is the point: a public record with one copy is one fire from gone. No permission is needed, and none is ours to grant or withhold.

- 0:00:00 Thank you. Please join us in welcoming First Lady of the Virgin Islands, Yolanda Bryan.
- 0:01:00 Please be seated. Please only rise when you are asked to rise, please. Thank you. Welcome, First Lady Bryan, we're happy that you joined us this evening. Thank you for coming. Please stand and join me in welcoming the Lieutenant Governor of the Virgin Islands, The Honorable Tregenza Roach, escorted by the Honorable Genevieve Whitaker, Secretary of the 34th Legislature.
- 0:02:13 Thank you. Thank you.
- 0:03:13 Thank you. You may be seated.
- 0:04:13 Good evening to the Honorable Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach. Thank you for joining us. Thank you. Please raise.
- 0:04:50 Madam President, the Honorable of the United States Virgin Islands, Albert White Jr. Thank you. I am so excited to be here tonight with you. But before I get going, I would like to take a moment, because I know I will forget,
- 0:06:42 to share a small token of the solidarity between the executive branch and the legislative branch to the Senate President. The token so that we always understand that while we may have our differences, the mission of the people rises beyond all else. Madam President. Reverend Father Anthony Abraham, Lieutenant Governor Paganza-Road Esquire, Senate President Donna Fred Gregory, and members of the 34th Legislature, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Virgin Islands, the Honorable Reese S. Hodge, presiding Judge Harold W. L. Willocks of the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands, members of my cabinet, staff, and other agency heads, my First Lady, my wife, First Lady Yolanda, Brian, invited guests, and my fellow Virgin Islanders.
- 0:07:50 Good evening. I am honored to stand before you for the fourth time as Governor of the Virgin Islands of the United States to report on the state of the territory as mandated in the revised Organic Act of 1954. I thank this body for graciously accepting my request to reschedule the delivery of this address from its original date of January 10th, as we

made the necessary adjustments to safeguard for the public's health.

- 0:08:21 Now, when I appeared before the Senate to present our very first state of the territory, on January 28, 2019, we were still reeling from the impact of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Our focus was the recovery from these twin disasters and stabilizing the finances of the government. Since then, we have experienced the additional trauma of a deadly global pandemic, and the largest private employer in the Virgin Islands closed its door for the second time in less than a decade. Most recently, we have been challenged by the rapid inflation and local prices brought about by the pandemic, supply chain disruptions, lack of housing, and many, many other factors.
- 0:09:16 However, Senators, I trust you have been reminded, as I have, that our people are remarkably resilient. And as a community, we have pushed ourselves to do better, to achieve more, and to overcome our limitations. And the results are becoming evident. We are not only surviving, we are thriving. While we've seen our fair shares of ups and downs in the past few years, our economy has demonstrated surprising rigidity. In 2019, the U.S. Virgin Islands economy saw expansion and growth in the aftermath of the 2017 hurricanes.
- 0:10:03 The gross domestic product advanced 2.2% that year. employment over the year had grown by 6%. Our housing industry was strong as the number of sales territory-wide grew by 31%, and the median sales price of the average home rose by 10%. The territory drew 2.1 million visitors and was on pace for even more in 2020. Then came the COVID-19 pandemic. Describing 2020 as a disruptive year for the U.S. Virgin Islands economy would be a gross understatement. We saw unemployment increase to a high of 13.6 percent and tourism severely declined. For over a year, the number of cruise passengers and the ships to come to our territory dropped to exactly zero. A decrease in the number of tourists translated to a decline in stays at the establishments which housed them, with hotel occupancy falling to 25% for 10%. Several of our hotels closed and furloughed workers.
- 0:11:14 many were unsure when or even if we would see economic recovery but that uncertainty however would not remain for long as economic indicators began to provide a more promising outlook with the successful distribution of vaccines and the implementation of balanced covid protocols which protected our health while enabling many businesses to stay open we led this territory on a narrow path to economic recovery. By October...
- 0:11:50 By October 2021, the economy had already regained almost 95% of the jobs lost during the pandemic. And the unemployment rate fell to 8%. A full 5.6 points from the initial hike. Visitor volume recovered nearly 80% from its low in 2020, and we started to draw regional and national attention as to how well we were doing despite COVID. We can proudly report that our efforts to keep America's Caribbean open and protect the livelihoods of those of us who depend on the hospitality industry have been very successful. Throughout the pandemic, the U.S. Virgin Islands continued to win accolades for its visitor experience as a travel destination.
- 0:12:44 We made Bloomberg Businessweek's prestigious list of the top places in the world to visit in 2022. Caribbean Journal, a preeminent tourism media house, recently named the USVI the most innovative destination of the year, thanks to the ingenuity of our travel screening portal, which processed more than 1 million applications just this year alone. As of November 2021, passenger air arrivals had more than doubled compared to the same period in 2020. Last year also, we saw the return of cruise passengers after the CDC's no-sail order stopped cruise ship traffic from March 2020 to June 2021. To facilitate the return of the cruise industry, We executed individual agreements with cruise lines to ensure that the vast majority of crew and the passengers were vaccinated and tested prior to getting to our territory.
- 0:13:44 The Caribbean Journal has also named the U.S. Virgin Islands the yachting destination of the year, which speaks to the successful transformation of our marine sector. The charter yacht sector has blossomed and become a significant component of our tourism industry. Once again, we are on top. Such recognition also underscores the growth and potential of the Blue Economy Initiative that we have been pursuing. Our hotel sector is also showing strong signs of recovery from the effects of the 2017 hurricanes and the impacts of the pandemic. According to reports from STR, a leader on hospitality data reporting, we have consistently led the Caribbean in average daily rate throughout the pandemic. In 2020, our occupancy rate was 46%, and the average daily rate was \$295.
- 0:14:38 By 2021, our occupancy rate grew to 70%, and the average daily rate to \$495. Despite the necessary change to their service models to comply with safety protocols, local restaurateurs were happy to report that their businesses were booming. The most loyal of customers found that they needed reservations all of a sudden, days in advance. I know that these numbers, that these impressive numbers, they're just not happenstance.
- 0:15:11 It took tremendous planning and hard work of our tourism team. And I would like to thank Commissioner Buschelta and his entire team down at Tourism for their hard work. On St. Croix, the 200-room Divi Carina Resort and Casino will fully reopen on February 1st as an all-inclusive, adult-only resort to include Divi's new brand, Oceans, an exclusive 50-room hotel within a hotel. The Buccaneer Hotel has become a Wyndham property, adding another worldwide respected brand

to the Big Island. On St. John, we are overjoyed with the reopening of Concordia Eco Resort, while the territory continues to enjoy considerable media attention around the new Lavango Key development. On St. Thomas, the Marriott Frenchman's Reef and Morningstar are finally making positive headway to opening in 2023. Our Airbnb business grew 100% in 2020. Then it grew an additional 200% in 2021.

- 0:16:23 providing much needed rooms in both districts. The mammoth resurgence of overnight guests and the jobs and the revenue that they helped generate were a welcome economic boost. We are committed to having a solid private sector that can continue to drive our economy for years to come. The Brian Roach administration has prided itself on true belt tightening and conservative financial forecasting. As a result, the government of the Virgin Islands continues to gain fiscal strength. Total tax revenues remain steady in fiscal year 2021 when compared to fiscal year 2020 at exactly \$839 million.
- 0:17:15 That is 10% greater than fiscal year 2019, and more than 30% greater than the revenues collected in fiscal year 2018. Over the last three years of this administration, we have seen the annual revenue collections exceed the revenue projections, creating birth budget surpluses that have not been seen in over 15 years, despite the pandemic. Furthermore, we have actually reduced the indebtedness of the government by over \$500 million just in the last three years. We have an excellent financial team, ably led by Jennifer O'Neill. I want to thank her, Joel Lee, Bosaidi Bruce, Brent Lierdom, Josh Springett, and the rest of the team as they continue to impress me with their excellent fiscal management skills.
- 0:18:14 We have projected several factors that we believe will provide sustainability to our revenue picture over the coming year. Chief amongst these is the continuous and steady expenditure of disaster recovery funds as many capital projects are completing the planning process and moving to construction. public sector spending in general will be crucial to economic activity.
- 0:18:49 Last year, the Department of Property and Procurement executed 630 contracts, totaling \$482 million, resulting in a 200 percent increase in executed contracts year over year. Now, as impressive as this sounds, this increase is going to keep growing and growing over the next several years as we expand the influx of hurricane and pandemic recovery funding.
- 0:19:20 We continue our commitment to increasing the efficiency and the productivity of government through the use of technology. The Department of Property and Procurement will be aided in its efforts by the successful launch of its online procurement system, GVI Buy. Now, all government bid solicitations, contracts, purchase orders, and invoicing will be done transparently through that system, which is now online. No longer will vendors be in the dark about the status of their invoices and when they can expect to be paid. Thank you, Commissioner Anthony Thomas and your team for your hard work. We were closed on Friday, but West Indian Petroleum is still finalizing the purchase of the refinery on St. Croix, and we are working with them to not only open safely, but to explore other potential uses for this sprawling industrial complex we are anticipating greater and greater economic certainty as we recover from the pandemic related reduction in business activity and the related decrease in leisure spending our tourism market is also expected to continue to roar back and to remain robust over the next year or two as we add more cruise calls flights hotel rooms and marine vessels to our product. Last year, we settled a federal court case which held excise taxes in abeyance for over three years. The collection of these taxes, which did not play a role in our administration's prior budget submission, has now been factored into our revenue projections, bolstering the financial position of the government once again, in addition to all these economic factors.
- 0:21:17 The territory is the recipient of sufficient federal funds to buttress the pandemic-related revenue losses and expenditures, not for one year, not for two years, not for three years, but for four years. There is much work to be done as we continue to improve the quality of life for all Virgin Islanders. But together, we got this. As I stand here tonight, I am happy to report that the state of the territory is stronger than ever, and only getting stronger.
- 0:21:59 Yes, yes, we have challenges, but for the first time in a very, very long time, we have the plans in place to address our challenges, and perhaps most importantly, the resources in order to implement those plans. We all know that the road here hasn't been easy. Daily I'm faced with residents suffering in one way or another, having a hard time to three major disasters in less than five years. But when I addressed this body last year, people said that I spoke too much about COVID. But there was no way of knowing then that the worst impacts of this global pandemic was still yet to come. The Delta variant caught governments throughout the nation and worldwide completely off guard. its lethality would lead, would wield COVID's most deadly blow to date. Now the Omicron variant is surprising the world again with its contagiousness. It has been a challenging time for members of our community living with the constant fear and anxiety that is due to this virus.
- 0:23:28 Even worse than that is the uncertainty of when we will return to normalcy. If ever, as we approach the third year, the global pandemic in the United States remains under National Public Health Emergency Declaration, as it does in the

Virgin Islands. It continues to be the most significant issue confronting our territory on a day-to-day basis, as it has been for the last two years. As I speak to you tonight, the surge in active cases brought about by the Omicron virus continues to rage through our territory.

0:24:10 We are in the midst of the fifth wave of the infections brought about by this pandemic. This pandemic has tested our ability to be adaptive in our response to the ever-changing and unpredictable circumstances of COVID. We battled the deadly variant of the virus from mid-summer through November of last year, and that variant was particularly lethal and contributed significantly to the 65 COVID-related deaths we had last year.

0:24:44 It's only January Virgin Islanders. We've already had eight COVID deaths already. I would like to spend a moment of silence for those families of not only those who have passed away, but who continue to suffer from the after effects of this pandemic. Now, just as we thought we had beaten back COVID and felt confident enough to begin relaxing emergency restrictions, Then came the news of the Omicron variant. The highly contagious nature of this variant has led to a record number of infections in the territory.

0:25:23 The rapid onset of this surge has created tremendous strain on our emergency rooms and our urgent care clinics. While we may all want to be done with COVID, COVID is certainly not done with us. The biggest weapon in our battle to withstand the COVID-19 pandemic last year was the availability of vaccines. We were the first jurisdiction in the nation to make them widely available to everyone. The easy access to free vaccination protected thousands of Virgin Islanders from the worst health effect of the COVID virus. The numbers don't lie. Yes, we have experienced breakthrough cases, which fully vaccinated individuals have ended up getting the virus. However, of the Virgin Islands that have unfortunately passed away due to complications from this virus, only two were fully vaccinated. We do not believe that this is a coincidence.

0:26:25 We have verified locally through our own observation what the medical professionals and the scientists have been telling us. Virgin Islanders who have taken the vaccine have been less likely to become seriously ill, less likely to require hospitalization, and less likely to die as a result of the COVID infection. It is this evidence that drives us to strongly encourage Virgin Islanders to get vaccinated as our primary tool to combat the COVID virus. Now, as of January 1, 54,175 Virgin Islanders have been fully vaccinated. According to the 2020 census data, that is approximately 62% of our total population. There is no question that the incentives that we had this summer worked. Perhaps of greater significance, more than 88.5% of the population over the age of 65, the most vulnerable among us, have been vaccinated in the Virgin Islands against the virus. We have not yet achieved our target for local herd immunity. However, the vaccines have helped us achieve our mission not to overwhelm our limited health care capacity. As a community, we have done relatively well in mitigating the health impacts of this pandemic. And when I walk through the community on a daily basis, throughout the territory, individuals often come up to me and commend me for the management of the pandemic.

0:28:07 I graciously accept their commendations and remind them that we are only managing this crisis as well as we are because of the tireless effort and dedication of the many COVID warriors who have done the heavy lifting to keep us all safe. We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the nurses, physicians, respiratory therapists, and other medical and support personnel at our hospitals and private clinics. We are equally grateful to the COVID task force that has strictly enforced the public health orders. We must not forget the unsung heroes in the public health laboratories and the epidemiologists who have been on the top of this virus from day one. The members of the National Guard have filled in where needed, from our beaches to doing passenger screening on the airport. We have dedicated, hardworking employees in the Department of Human Services, the Department of finance the department of labor office of management and budget bir bureau of internal revenue that have made sure that the economic aid to the territory is made available to our residents in a timely fashion and we owe a tremendous appreciation to our residents who adhere to the safety protocols that kept us all safe. We have been blessed with a strong leadership team that has assisted me in decision-making.

0:29:47 I have received daily guidance from Commissioner Husta Encarnacion, Director Daryl Joshin, Commissioners Richard Evangelista, Ray Martinez, Kimberley Cusi-Gomez, Joseph Buschelte. Dr. Louis Amaro and Daima Williams have been major contributors at our hospitals. Major General Kojo Knox Limbacher, and of course, former Commissioner Trevor Velenor, Dr. Esther Ellis, and Dr. Nicole Sims. Can't forget Dr. Ty Hunt Caesar. And the always and steady wise counsel of Lieutenant Governor Trigenza Roach. This has been an active part of some of the most challenging decisions, literally on matters of life and death on a daily basis. Please join me in recognizing our public servants and our unsung heroes who have helped us make it this far and are bolstered to our community in our progress against the pandemic. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

- 0:31:10 Now, I don't know if we are any closer to the end of this crisis or if we are truly just at the beginning. We have heard all the pundits and the professionals about the theories of how the pandemic ultimately ends but does anyone truly know but what I do know is that Virgin Islanders are some of the most resilient people you can find on planet earth and we will weather this storm just as we have weathered every other storm before it. Our response to the COVID pandemic balanced the need to protect public health while mitigating the negative impact on the economy. We have always understood that it was paramount to protect people's lives as well as their livelihoods. Delegate Stacy Flakett Terry Helenese and our Washington team and I have made sure that Congress and the Biden administration recognize the economic hardships imposed by the pandemic and the resulting public health response here in the Virgin Islands. The federal government has made an unprecedented commitment of resources to aid individuals, businesses, and the local government, on top of the recovery measures for the catastrophes of hurricanes of 2017. When you look at the economic impact, the Bureau of Internal Revenue paid \$147 million in economic impact payments, better known to you as stimulus checks. And that's in 2021 alone, with a total of over 98,000 checks issued.
- 0:33:15 That's more checks than we have people. The BIR also paid more than \$19 million in advanced child tax credits to 8,634 households with minor Virgin Islands children. The Department of Labor paid out over \$104 million in unemployment insurance claim. It warmed our hearts to hear from citizens about being able to improve their quality of life after being laid off, seniors being able to afford their medication, college graduates being able to start paying down on their school loans, and fathers being able to open a saving account for their families. Our children didn't go hungry.
- 0:34:03 As a matter of fact, I was out at BCB this morning with Ms. Bastian and Mr. Bartlett in the kitchen and all the other people there working. Food smelled good at 9 a.m., working to keep our children fed. Checks are coming. We ain't forgot you. But the Department of Human Services pitched in as well to meet the nutritional needs of our children by administering the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer, or PEBT as we know it. Through this program, children receive temporary emergency nutrition benefits. The department paid out almost \$13 million in PEBT payments to children in the 2021 school year, and approximately \$3.4 million to children that were enrolled in regular child care.
- 0:35:01 Another \$6.75 million to children over the summer. That is over \$23 million in food benefits distributed to families in need. This is on top of the \$55 million in food stamps that they distribute annually. They need an applause for that. We didn't leave the small business out.
- 0:35:31 Some 3,430 small businesses participated in the Paycheck Protection Program, receiving over \$75 million to keep their workforce employed and pay their rent. Local restaurants and bars took advantage of the Restaurant Revitalization Fund, receiving almost \$6 million in funding. Another 1,833 businesses received economic injury disaster loans, totaling more than \$121 million. The U.S. Virgin Islands received per capita more economic disaster injury funds than anywhere else in the entire country. In all between these four programs, businesses in the Virgin Islands receive more than \$202 million in aid, and just, just in 2021. The 2017 hurricane disaster recovery continues to gain momentum.
- 0:36:34 And the road ahead is filled with visible evidence of the reconstruction of a brighter future for all Virgin Islanders. In 2021, we witnessed a burst of recovery activity, with more than 220 projects underway, despite the lags in the federal process and the delays due to COVID. This year, we have 275 projects scheduled for construction or planned for completion. The recent hard-fought approval for the full replacement of the wastewater system on St. Croix boosts the available recovery dollars from \$8 billion to \$9.5 billion. Over the next few years, federal programs will continue to support a rise out of the devastation of the storm. As of December 31st, the Brian Roach administration has secured 75% or \$6 billion of those funds, obligating \$4.8 billion to specific projects and paying out over \$2.4 billion to complete this critical work. In 2021, expenditures increased 98.9% to \$787 million, up by almost \$400 million year over year.
- 0:37:57 Now, the RAND report that was funded by FEMA predicted that the best we could do would probably be spend \$500 million a year. But we have surpassed that mark already as we move further along this path to recovery. The Office of Disaster Recovery presses forward to get the funds, and more importantly, to spend the funds and spend them correctly. I applaud Director Adrienne Williams-Octolin and her dedicated team, as well as our local and federal stakeholders, for their roles in ensuring we receive every single penny that is due to us. See, there's one thing, there's one thing that I consider as non-negotiable, as I serve as your governor.
- 0:38:57 And you know it too, it is always to be honest in what we can and what we cannot achieve. I pride myself in our ability to deliver on the commitment Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach and I made to you over three years ago as we blazed the campaign trail. The people ask, and we delivered, despite COVID. We prioritize the things you told us were important. The stability of government is paramount to the stability of our people. With the strengthening economy and the significant availability of federal funds, my administration has made a concerted effort to invest, to invest not only in our people, but in our infrastructure and certainly our future.

- 0:39:54 The enormous, the enormous unfunded liability facing our public employee pension system is perhaps the most significant financial crisis that our community faces. See, there are thousands of Virgin Islanders who depend on the government employees' retirement system. They depend on it for a substantial part of their annual income. Many of our local businesses depend on the patronage of these pensioners. There are also thousands more Virgin Islanders who pay between 11% and 14% of their gross pay every two weeks in hopes of securing their financial future when they can no longer work.
- 0:40:41 As we truthfully assess this situation, the GRS is already in salt And on the verge of complete collapse, the actuaries are predicting the system to run out of assets on or before October 2024. But if we continue this status quo until then, it is projected that the employer and the employee contributions will cover less than half of the benefits that are to be paid out. At that time, the shortfall will either have to be paid annually from the general fund or the pensions of the retirees in the system will have to be reduced by half. Our administration has worked tirelessly on understanding the issues driving the growing unfunded liability and resulting insolvency of our pension system. We understand the issues that are required, and we understand the solutions as well. Senators, I am truly pleased that we can present to the people of the Virgin Islands, together, a consensus solution to this decades-long vexing problem. We have before us a great opportunity through the collaborative legislative proposal to refinance the government of the Virgin Islands debt at the current historically low interest rate, allowing us to stabilize the government employees' retirement system. The core elements of this proposal remain similar to the three transactions originally proposed to the 33rd legislature in 2020. The revenues generated by the rum cover over receipts are being pledged as the financial base of the transaction. The government would
- 0:42:42 refund and restructure the outstanding matching fund bonds, thereby reducing debt service payment. And then we would dedicate those revenues, and we'd have to add in a little bit more, to fund the GRS and meet the pensioner's funding needs. Now, we know that this issue keeps all of us up at night. At least it should. Under the proposed scenario, financial stability would be returned to the GRS without any reductions to the pensions or to the retirees.
- 0:43:16 Our success in this endeavor will also send a powerful signal to the financial markets that the U.S. Virgin Islands is getting its financial house in order. Most importantly, there are nearly 17,500 retirees and active employees who are depending on us senators for our action. This proposal will end the anxiety experienced by the retired employees. secure the financial futures of the current employees, and restore the attractiveness of the retirement benefits for the future employees. This proposal doesn't kick the can down the road. It crushes the can.
- 0:44:04 It solves the GRS crisis for decades, decades to come. Last year, I stood before this body and pledged to restore the 2012 Viesla 8% payroll cut. Many of you didn't believe me. You had your doubts.
- 0:44:41 But before the year was over, we delivered on that promise. As of today, 5,915 employees have been paid a total of approximately \$41.5 million. This is an average reimbursement of about \$7,000 per person. The release of these funds allowed the recipients to improve their economic well-being by acquiring assets, making home improvements, and paying down some of that debt. They also needed for this tremendous rise in inflation to take care of their daily expenses. It also infused money into the economy, the community, and supported the same small businesses which have depended on us to survive, especially during this last two years of the pandemic. In the face of a rapidly rising cost of living, this was very, very timely. I want to thank this body, this body, for passing the legislation that enabled us to keep this commitment.
- 0:46:00 Thank you. Thank you. Last year, our administration paid up more than 38,000 refund checks, totaling \$96 million in past due income tax. It is the most tax refunds ever paid out in a single year. But that's not the good news. The good news is, we remain on track to become current on the backlog of income tax refund later this year.
- 0:46:48 And once we are caught up, we intend to remain current. As part of the American Rescue Plan Act, Congress has agreed now. to begin reimbursing the local government for its expenditures related to applying the Earned Income Tax Credit, or the EITC. See, the Earned Income Tax Credit subsidizes low-income working families whose earned income is insufficient to sustain them and their dependents. The EITC encourages and rewards work by ensuring families have a livable wage this tax credit is usually paid out to taxpayers as part of the tax refund now although it's a part of the federal tax code this credit has been paid out of our money the general fund of the government for years over the years paying this out while it's the right thing to do because people need the money it has been very costly for us and is certainly one of the main reasons why we have fallen so far behind in paying our tax returns I'm sorry she's not here so you're gonna have to do this one big for her that is why we are extremely grateful for the efforts of our delegate to Congress the Honorable Stacey Foskett in finally getting Congress to agree to reimburse this expense she's not here tonight but I hope wherever she is she could hear the clapping because this

- 0:48:40 was truly a huge win for the territory now when lieutenant governor Roach and I took office, we understood that we could not tackle the myriad of issues that confronted us all at once. We knew we had to establish some priorities to how we would solve these problems. So our administration decided to place priority on the repayment of income tax reforms because it represented the greatest number of people owed by the government. So we spent the last three years reducing the backlog of funds owed to taxpayers.
- 0:49:24 As I mentioned earlier, we also addressed the VAESA payroll cuts. But now that we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel on GRS, we can shift our focus now to yet another long obligation, a very long-standing obligation of this government, the payment of retroactive wages. Director nominee Cindy Richardson and her fabulous team down at Personnel maintain a constant and consistent calculation of what is owed in retroactive to present and former employees. Understand, this is for salary increases that were promised, but were never paid.
- 0:50:18 These debts, this money we owe, dates back more than 30 years to 1990. But this evening, through my consultations with the Senate President, Donna Fred Gregory, and her bold and noble Vice President, Novel Francis. We are committing to pay. You waiting for it, eh? We are committing to paying down at least 15% or \$26 million at least in retroactive wages in this current fiscal year. I am going further than that because I don't want you to believe it's an election ploy.
- 0:51:08 I am also proposing that we plan to pay the remaining balance of what is owed at annual installments of at least \$25 million every single year until the full obligation is repaid. The fiscal year 2023 executive budget that I submit for the approval in May will include an appropriation in keeping with this plan. Now, we will need legislative action to make good on the commitment.
- 0:51:49 So I humbly ask for the support of this body in this endeavor. senators i am sure that we can all agree that taking care of these public servants who have been waiting on the government to make them whole for over three decades is a worthwhile challenge let us make this the year that we not only solve the pension crisis at grs but we also commit to a sustainable plan for the repayment of the retroactive wages owed to our retirees The financial security of our seniors is of our utmost importance to our administration.
- 0:52:42 We are also invested in their health, housing, recreation, and the overall quality of life. To further our commitment on that agenda, we will be reconstituting the membership of the Commission on Aging this year, I thank the AARP for working with us to get that. And I look forward to working with the Commission to ensure that the needs of our elders are not ignored and they are properly addressed. In addition to investing in our people, though, we have to also make considerable investments in improving our infrastructure. We required a lot of patience as FEMA reviewed our request for a revision for the floodplain maps. But as promised, the construction of the Pali Joseph Stadium resumed last year. There are, however, some additional amenities not currently included in the contract that we believe will add value to the project. The estimated cost of those improvements, as we sent to the legislature before, is approximately \$3 million. We will be presenting those recommendations to this body for your consideration. and look forward to the discussion. We believe that these final additions will help ensure that this was a stadium worth waiting for.
- 0:54:12 With the help of this body, we have been able to fund the restoration of the drag racing facility in St. Croix. Drag racing will be returning to St. Croix this year. But unfortunately, horse racing is unlikely to return until 2023. We have amended the agreement with VIGL as it relates to the operation of the racetracks. While they are still responsible for the operation of both tracks, this allowed us to authorize them to proceed with the redevelopment of the Randall Doc James track on St. Croix, while we work to resolve the lawsuit that has hindered progress on returning horse racing on St. Thomas. We continue to monitor VIGL as it proceeds with the renovation of the racetrack on St. Croix.
- 0:54:58 And we are pleased to announce, by hook or by crook, VIGL or no VIGL, we're going to get this horse racetrack built in St. Croix. I also want to say that this week we will be submitting, most likely tomorrow, to the Senate President an agreement for the resumption of the renovations at the Clinton Phipps Racetrack here on St. Thomas. Southland has presented us with an opportunity where they will build the entire track in St. Thomas for us in exchange for an extension of their exclusivity with their gaming. We're looking forward to the full-body support of this body to ensure that we return horse racing on both islands. The Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation is in the midst of an aggressive effort to redevelop its facilities.
- 0:55:57 Repairs were completed to several parks, including the Isaac Boynes Park in Grove Place and the Pedro Cruz Ballpark in Estate Profit. The department has an incredible queue of projects, either in construction, under construction, or about to commence. This year, we'll see the completion of restoration and repair projects at Emile Griffith Ballpark, Lionel Roberts Stadium, Rudy Krieger in science form, Renhold Jackson in Wim, Alvin McBean Park in Tutu, Kerwin Terrace Ballpark, and Joseph Fabien Ballpark in French Town. We are also actively facilitating the development of cricket pitches on both St. Thomas and St. Croix, as we believe cricket as a big place in our future. In Frederickstead, the

revitalization of the Medrick Commons Recreational and Youth Facility has been completed. This is a custom-designed project built by the members of the Virgin Islands community, because people came from as far away as St. John to help. That only happened with \$400,000 in seed funding from the government of the Virgin Islands, supported by this body. We thank all of the private sector donors, though, and the hundreds of community volunteers who contributed to this beautiful project that honors a proud Virgin Islander, Nidre Almeric Cummings. Repairs are underway at Fort Frederick Beach Pavilion on one side of town and the Vincent Mason Senior Pool on the other side of town. On the east end of St. Croix, construction is also underway on the pavilions at Kramers Park. I would like to thank Commissioner Calvert-White and the team at Sports Park and Recreation for their excellent work. It's time to get our children out and back to playing ball.

0:57:45 One of our observations throughout the pandemic is that those who are most likely to succumb to the virus already had pre-existing health condition. Many victims suffered from obesity, hypertension, diabetes, or other ailments. For this reason, we have renewed our focus on preventative health care. We all know someone. Most of us have a family member or at least a friend who has been impacted by diabetes. And we are committed to helping persons with diabetes manage their care in an effort to improve the quality of life for persons who are living with diabetes or those at risk for diabetes. We have partnered with the Virgin Islands Diabetes Center for Excellence to bring added health care specialists and clinical care to the territory to treat individuals with diabetes and provide increased educational outreach and services. The Center of Excellence is a nonprofit and hopes to serve 1,000 Virgin Islanders within its first year with lifestyle and health care services, and more than 10,000 residents with its educational outreach. That's not enough, though. We have also set aside \$1 million for the Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation to launch a health and wellness campaign with programs accessible to individuals of all ages and abilities.

0:59:21 We are working to improve the physical fitness of our community and the health of our people by getting them up and getting them out. You see, our health care professionals, they're doing an incredible job responding to a global pandemic in a less than ideal environment. After four years, our hospital infrastructure is still struggling to recover from the effects of Hurricane Zirma and Maria. And our administration has invested millions of dollars in the last year to ensure that they have the needed resources, our health care workers, they have the resources to provide the best care possible to our residents. Now, restoration of these facilities may remain a top priority in our disaster recovery. The temporary replacement for hurricane-damaged Governor Wann F. Louis Hospital, referred to as JFL North, remains frustratingly close to completion. JFL is a 110-bed temporary hospital that will serve the acute care needs of St. Croix for five to seven years necessary for the demolition and rebuilding of the permanent hospital. The temporary facility is essentially finished and it fully furnished, but it requires utility connections to be fully functional. And installing these connections has proven to be extremely complicated for a variety of reasons, including the existing site conditions. Now last year, I got in trouble when I attempted to project the completion date for this facility.

1:01:11 However, in the interest of transparency, I will take the risk once again and report that JFL's new projection for the functional opening of JFL North will be this summer. I want to publicly welcome on board, and gladly welcome on board, the Chief Executive Officer of the Governor Juan F. Louis Hospital, Douglas Koch. He has a lot of work cut out for him, Mr. Koch. But even as the board and management of JFL work feverishly to open the temporary hospital, The design process has begun on the permanent hospital and replacement. The WANF Louis Hospital awarded a contract for architectural services to Flat Associates for the design of the new WANF Louis Hospital. Flat Associates has also been retained by the Department of Health to design the replacement Charles Howard Medical Center.

1:02:13 Now, last year, after wrestling back and forth for four years, four years, FEMA finally approved the complete replacement of the Charlotte Kimmelman Cancer Institute on St. Thomas and the Myra Keating-Smith Community Health Center on St. John. The architectural and engineering design of both facilities is currently underway, and we expect to see work begin this year. Now, unlike the other facilities, the Schneider Regional Medical Center has not been approved for replacement. FEMA and the territory continue to negotiate disagreements on the scope of damages to be funded. FEMA's reluctance to acknowledge the full scope of the damage caused by the hurricanes at the hospital has unfortunately delayed the progress on the repairs. But while the process has been frustratingly slow, the effort is going to be so, so worth it. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build brand-new, modern, state-of-the-art health facilities to serve the people of the Virgin Islands, an opportunity to build health facilities that are resilient and sustainable, an opportunity to build facilities that will make the Virgin Islanders who go to work there every day, and those of us who visit, extremely proud.

1:03:37 But in the meantime, we will spare no expenses in ensuring that the hospital systems maintain an adequate level of service to meet the needs of this community. But you see, hospitals are not just about facilities. Their effectiveness is fully dependent on the professionals that work there. We understand the stress and strain that has undoubtedly been

experienced by the staff at our hospital, as they've worked long and arduous hours under very difficult circumstances. Now, we've done our best to augment staffing and provide reinforcements through contract labor. However, this is just a temporary solution.

- 1:04:21 At best, the key to the future of health care in the territory is to retain the qualified Virgin Islanders that currently staff our health care centers and to recruit a whole new generation of Virgin Islanders to the health care profession. To that end, in consultation with both hospitals, we have set aside \$16 million to execute a recruitment and retention program for nurses and allied health professionals right here in the territory.
- 1:05:03 Nurses and allied health professionals, we would have paid you already, but we're working with your affected unions to make sure we do this implementation right and as it's permanent to your salaries. Tonight though, we are extremely grateful to recognize four of our first responders for their exemplary service over the last year. These employees represent some of the most dedicated public servants. From St. Croix District, EMT Anne Marie Camacho is not here, but we are joined by Evelisse Santiago, a registered nurse from the Juan F. Louis Hospital. And from the St. Thomas St. Don district, EMT Louie Robles is not here, but we do have Deborah Krause Hodge, a registered nurse from the Snyder Regional Medical Center.
- 1:06:20 Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. They have done an incredible job, you know. And at the darkest hour, you know, they often tell me, they said, you know, we're the only office that don't shut down because of COVID. You remember that. Now, the provision of affordable and reliable and quality water and power is an essential part of our infrastructure and crucial for our continued economic growth. The inadequacy of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority in fulfilling this mission has been the source of much discussion, plenty of deliberation, and a gene-banger frustration in this community for decades. For decades.
- 1:07:16 However, I have maintained that WAPA is a public corporation and an asset that belongs to you and I, the people of the Virgin Islands. And as governor, I do not have the option of watching a public institution fail. So we have spent the last three years working closely with the board and the management to stabilize the Water and Power Authority. through some very, very trying times. Now, WAPA has before it an opportunity to start to regain the public's trust and confidence by installing a completely new leadership team. This process has begun with the hiring of a new chief executive officer, Andrew Smith.
- 1:08:06 We wish him much success as he guides WAPA forward. Now, he will soon be selecting a new chief financial officer and a new chief operating officer to assist them in that task. See, there are two important aspects of WAPA's delivery of service. Reliability and cost. WAPA is making great strides in implementing the necessary measures to improve reliability. There are three electrical underground projects presently under construction on St. Croix at Midland, Golden Grove, and Container Port. WAPA has also begun burying lines on the ground in Cruise Bay and is designing a similar project for St. Thomas. Over 4,700 composite poles have already been installed across the territory. In all, 8,500 composite poles will be installed before January 2024. WAPA has begun reconstructing its substations that were damaged by the hurricanes. The St. Thomas East End substation has been completely repaired. This year, WAPA will begin the installation of standby generators on St. John, and for the first time ever, WAPA is installing battery energy storage systems. The cumulative effect of these projects will reduce the frequency of power outages and the duration of those outages. But where WAPA has failed to make adequate progress thus far, it's on the bigger challenge of providing power at a reasonable cost. Now, through countless conversations with WAPA and consultation with other advisors, it is clear to me that WAPA has three urgent priorities. Expedite the installation of the recently delivered watch solar generators that will improve power plant efficiency.
- 1:10:01 We don't need all foreign, just give us two so our current can stay on. Immediately refinance the debt owed to VTOL for construction of the propane terminals. That's a big part of the bill that we're paying right now. And fast-track, fast-track the renewable projects that they have in the pipeline. The debt owed to VTOL is structured as a high-interest rate, short-term note. WAPA must restructure that debt now into a lower interest rate and a longer-term obligation. I am calling on WAPA and the Public Service Commission to expedite this matter while we still enjoy a favorable interest rate environment. Refinancing that debt results in immediate savings to you, the ratepayer.
- 1:10:48 Now, in the Virgin Islands, we don't control commodity prices. Oil and propane, just like food and rent, are seeing incredible amounts of inflation. and price increases. But we as a government will stand in front, and we will not allow WAPA to fully pass on that increase to our rate payers. I pledge to you tonight to identify the funds to buy down those increases if it becomes necessary, just like we did the year before.
- 1:11:26 But, however, this approach is not sustainable. If WAPA is to survive and properly serve this community, it must transform itself into a renewable energy company and focus more on the distribution of energy than it does on producing

the power itself. Increasing the amount of power produced by the renewable energy provides a hedge against increasing fossil fuel prices.

- 1:11:55 The rebuilding of the solar farm in Estate Duna is 70% complete and should be back online this spring. This is a great start, but WAPA also needs to give greater priority to the development of FEMA-funded 28-megawatt St. Croix microgrid project and the 10-megawatt wind farm in Bovoni. See, we are ensuring that WAPA is making this transformation towards greater dependence on renewable energy. I've instructed the director of the energy office, Kyle Fleming, to establish a low-interest loan program to fund the installation of solar energy for small residential customers of WAPA. We are going to develop a loan fund of \$25 million, large enough to take 1,000 people off the grid every single year.
- 1:12:52 This energy independence will mean independence for many of Virgin Islanders who are held hostage by their WAPA bill. We will not allow the people of the Virgin Islands to be held hostage. The repayment of these loans will be conveniently done through your WAPA bill with no money down, as was successfully done before with the solar water heater installation. We are designing this program in a matter that is harmless to WAPA and beneficial to the customers. These solar installations will remain grid-connected and will have WAPA as a standby source of power. The interest accrued on the loans that we give out will be retained by WAPA and used to fund more energy independence for more Virgin Islanders. The increased production of solar energy will benefit all of WAPA's customers. This is the future of the utility industry, and that future is calling now. Last year, we completed two major transportation projects that not only improved traffic flow in Charlotte and Mali, but provided a much-needed aesthetic upgrade to our waterfront and our downtown areas. Now, after 13 years of frustration and inconvenience, the Main Street Revitalization Project was finally concluded. The cobblestone road and decorative streetlights are a welcome refresh of the Main Street experience. And likewise, after 30 years, the longstanding effort to expand Veterans Drive to a four-lane highway has moved one step closer to fruition with the completion of Phase 1 of the Veterans Drive Improvement Project. The improvements not only add safety and utility to the highway, but also add beauty to the world-class views of the Charlotte Amali waterfront. Now, numerous other federal road projects were completed this year, including Crown Bay drainage and pedestrian improvements, the Eastern Cemetery Roadway Phase 2, the Benner Hill Guardrail Project, and the Hess Road on St. Croix.
- 1:15:27 But while FEMA and HUD have pledged resources towards repairs, this process has been frustratingly slow and very tedious. Furthermore, the federal highway funding allocated to the territory is simply insufficient for the actual repairs required. Our administration has lobbied Congress and the U.S. Department of Transportation for a larger allocation of funding for the U.S. Virgin Islands. The federal bipartisan infrastructure bill passed in November only increased the federal funding for roads and bridges to \$19 million annually.
- 1:16:00 This is a far, far cry from the \$35 million that the officials in the Department of Public Works have been telling us is necessary to repair and maintain all of the territory's roadways. But we will continue to lobby on behalf of the territory, alongside our delegate, Stacey Plaskett, for increased transportation and funding. But this past year, we made a concerted effort to address our neighborhood roads that are not part of the federal system. We appropriated \$20 million in fiscal year 2021 of local funds for road repairs.
- 1:16:37 are proud to say, with these funds, last year we completed road projects on Garden Street, Princeton's Garda, Estate Miss Gunston and Lurkenland, Hospital Ground, Estate Lorraine, St. George, Campo Rico, Bug Behold, Wim, Work and Rest, Catrian Rest, Union Mount Washington, Mount Pleasant East, and Strawberry Hill. I thank this body and the members of the 33rd Legislature for approving our appropriation request and allowing these road paving projects to move forward.
- 1:17:11 Now, of course, we will be including more road paving projects with the upcoming budget. But as I speak this evening, we have contracts in place for road repairs taking place at Gallows Bay, Estate Herman Hill, Mandel, Smith Bay, Mount Pleasant, Upper Love, Estate Hope, Pearl, Marion Hoy, Estate St. Peter, Lillian Dahl, and Estate Carolina on St. John. This year, we also expect to begin road repairs or drainage improvement in projects in Estate Thomas on First Avenue and Bovoni in St. Thomas, Centerline Road, Fish Bay, Mahou Bay, and Coralby on the island of St. John, and Clifton Hill, Estate Richmond, Calcahoun, and Williams Delight on St. Croix. And repairs are planned for Water Island roads as well. We have also funded 367 light replacements along the Melvin H. Evans Highway.
- 1:18:15 It's going to be light up like an airport runway. And, of course, we look forward to continuing several projects we have initiated, including the work on Veterans Drive Phase 2. Thank you, Commissioner Gabriel and your team for your aggressive efforts to repair the roads of the Virgin Islands.
- 1:18:46 We also continue to make major investments in the development of our port facilities. year, the Virgin Islands Port Authority completed the expansion of the departure terminal at Henry E. Rosen Airport, and it is indeed a beautiful piece

of work. Work continues on the construction of the transportation center, or like we call it, the parking garage at the Cyril E. King Airport, and the new Gordon A. Finch Molasses Fair is just about done on the south shore of St. Croix. Carlton Doe, right now, and his all-star team at the Port Authority, continue to do this great work. We look forward to finalizing negotiations between the Public Finance Authority and the Port Authority to effectuate the final transfer of WICO.

1:19:42 We still remain committed to consolidating the management of the cruise ship business within one agency. Now, we have a lot of things to do, but the shortage of housing for working people threatens to derail the economic growth of the U.S. Virgin Islands. This body is to be commended for the passage of the First Time Home Buyers Program Act and the appropriation of \$4 million for homeownership. These are for people who don't qualify for the regular programs. This provides an additional tool in our efforts to financially support Virgin Islanders seeking to purchase land for home construction, build or purchase a house, or repair or rehabilitate an existing house for use as their primary resident. That measure supplements \$70 million for homeownership and construction and first-time homebuyer assistance already earmarked in our HUD funding. If that's not enough, we are also using the ARPA plan, dedicating an additional \$10 million to make sure that we get housing affordable, and that's being powered by our Office of Management and Budget for Affordable Housing. Last year, we saw the unveiling of the most symbolic demonstration to modern affordable housing in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

1:21:11 Megan's Junction 2. I was so pleased to meet the residents and proud that they now call this development their home. This 60-unit, nine-story apartment complex represents the future and sets the local standard for housing construction. This public-private partnership was developed by Jackson Development Company. and financed through a combination of local and federal funding administered by our Housing Finance Authority. The state-of-the-art building was designed to be sustainable and is independent of WAPA Energy.

1:21:47 Powered by microturbine generators, solar energy, and battery storage, this is what the future of affordable housing in the Virgin Islands looks like. The Virgin Islands Housing Authority has been extremely aggressive in repairing and restoring its low-income housing stock. The DUNU redevelopment project continues to progress and is slated to be completed in December. That is a \$57.4 million housing development that will consist of 84 brand-new rental units, affordable units on the island of St. Thomas. The buildings at Tutu High Rise are now being demolished to clear the way for a new development there. The authority will begin reinvigorating the Walter-I.M. Hodge Pavilion community in Frederickstead, thanks to a \$78.6 million in multi-grant financing. Work is expected to start this month and will completely rehabilitate 248 units in this housing community, including several buildings that were abandoned long before the hurricane struck the territory. This will increase the inventory of housing for low-income families on St. Croix. It will also provide a much-needed modernization and facelift for the current members of that community. The Housing Authority has also a current solicitation for bids to construct a new 98-unit senior housing complex in a state stony ground in Frederickstead that is expected to begin this summer. The demolition of the Ludwig Harrigan site in frederickstead is complete paving the way for the development of even more senior housing on that site the housing authority has also been actively repairing the storm related damage to its properties this past year the authority completed extensive roof repairs at michael j kerwin terrace paul and pearson gardens the nose at content and molly homes the authority was allocated a little over 61 million dollars by fema to conduct repairs within the remaining housing communities that were most devastated by the storm tonight i congratulate robert graham and lydia pell and the good folks at the virgin islands housing authority on their work to transform our housing stock the sheltering and temporary essential

1:24:16 Power Pilot Program, or STEP, is the predecessor of the Envision Tomorrow Program. Now, that was a success. The pilot program completed temporary roof repairs of 6,500 homes in the immediate aftermath of the storm. Phase 2 provided permanent roof repairs to 1,600 homeowners. However, the success of the program was tainted by the failure of the federal government to pay the contractors and the vendors for their services. So although construction concluded in April 2019, the biggest challenge was producing the documentation required by FEMA in order to reimburse the territory for the cost of the repairs and the related experiences. This past year, the Office of Disaster Recovery and the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority made significant progress in resolving most of those outstanding disputes with FEMA.

1:25:18 Because of those efforts, I'm pleased to say that in 2021, the STEP program paid out \$341 million to the contractors associated with this project. This brings the total payments for that program to \$703 million paid to the contractors and their vendors, most of which were local small businesses. I would like to thank these contractors and vendors for their patience and the work they did to put Virgin Islanders back in their homes after the storms. I also want to thank Executive Director Darrell Griffith and the staff at the Housing Finance Authority who have worked tirelessly to get this issue resolved. The Envision Tomorrow has generated a lot of discussion in political forums of our community. And even more so in the homes of the residents enrolled in those programs.

- 1:26:21 It has certainly not moved at the pace that we envisioned. Our reality is, though, that any program generous enough to grant a homeowner as much as \$250,000 of federal tax dollars to invest in their private property with no requirement for payback demands significant checks and balances. However, for those who are patient in tolerating the federal bureaucracy of this program, the reward is tremendous.
- 1:26:55 Now, this is not a roofing program. These are the houses that were damaged the most in the storm and were not able to be repaired under the two programs. It focuses on structures that require major repairs and mostly total reconstruction and demolition of the old building. This is the first time in the aftermath of a disaster that the government of the Virgin Islands has attempted a program this ambitious. It was designed to assist those homeowners who lack insurance or other resources need to rebuild.
- 1:27:31 Now, I'll be the first to tell you, Envision Tomorrow got off to a notoriously piss-poor slow start. There's reason for optimism now for those applicants who are still awaiting repairs to their homes. In the past year, as we pushed to get this program moving faster, we learned a lot of valuable lessons along the way, and we are now confident that the program is moving more efficiently before. The program is on track to have all eligible homeowners sign their grant awards by June of this year. The Housing Finance Authority is projecting that they will begin construction on at least 200 homes in 2022. I totally understand the frustration of those waiting for assistance, but I vow as your governor to keep the pressure on the Housing Finance Authority until every participant in this program is properly housed.
- 1:28:26 Now, under the tenure of former Commissioner Trevor Velliner and current Commissioner Ray Martinez, the Virgin Islands Police Department has undertaken efforts to improve its relationship with the community. We are guided by the notion that, together, we can tackle the problem of crime. See, we all play an active role in the safety of our community. In my last address, I issued a call to action. If you see something, say something. I'm exceedingly proud to say that our community has answered. In the past few months, VIPD made several arrests in connection with robberies and homicides. These arrests are the direct result of developing a partnership between VIPD and a community who will no longer stand for a norm of violence. VIPD has demonstrated that when we work together, they can and will remove criminals that terrorize our community from our neighborhoods. I see progress in our future as it relates to fighting crime. VIPD has revamped and expanded its recruitment strategy. While the department has seen the hiring of 63 new employees, including police officers, police auxiliary, and community service officers, and key civilian staff, it still needs hundreds of officers territory-wide.
- 1:29:45 I once again urge the men and women of this territory to consider the various career opportunities available at the police department. The VIPD continues to increase its crime-fighting technology capabilities. To date, the first phase of the camera project has been completed. We now have 105 cameras throughout the territory, some of which include license plate reading capabilities. VIPD has already begun to use camera footages to aid in crime-fighting.
- 1:30:17 that looks forward to launching the department's real-time crime centers as a monitoring base in both districts we anticipate two more phases of this project which will provide an additional 473 cameras territory-wide the department has acquired its first drone and four more are in process they will provide aerial support to conduct aerial searches and rescue missions vipd also purchased a new automated fingerprint identification system for fingerprint comparison both locally and nationally to link criminals to crimes and store fingerprint data for future reference our officers will soon be outfitted with body-worn cameras for the safety of officers and civilians alike we are investing in the police department and i look forward to seeing our men and women in blue deploying these resources to further combat crime however the best way to fight crime is to prevent it from occurring in the first place now after several rounds of interviews tonight i am pleased to announce to you the launch of the office of gun violence prevention in the governor's office, which will be led by the director of that, Mr. Antonio Emanuel. Now, while Mr. Emanuel has law enforcement background, he was selected for his experience in working with at-risk youth in their communities. We have tasked him with executing strategic community-based interventions in line with the National Network for Safety Communities Model. Mr. Emanuel, in taking this position, now serves as the head of the Governor's Advisory Council on Community Violence Intervention. The Council brings together government, non-profits, religious, and private sector partners to provide guidance to the Office of Gun Violence Prevention. I am committed to providing resources and support to ensure the success of this program and hope that this legislature will join me in this effort. You see, illegal firearms continue to be an escalating problem in the territory. In 2021,
- 1:32:44 VIPD confiscated 153 illegal firearms. At the beginning of last year, I submitted legislation to this body, to bolster our laws surrounding firearms. Following Senate input and Committee of the Whole, I revised and resubmitted the legislation, which now seeks to institute a 24-hour declaration of firearms entering the territory. Increased punitive measures for failing to report lost or stolen firearms, and it establishes safe firearm storage requirements in homes and in businesses. Senators, we have a common goal in addressing the presence of illegal firearms in the territory. I look

forward to working with you to see the legislation through the process to passage an enactment.

- 1:33:35 I'm also looking to the legislature for forward movement on the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Service Bill. The integration of fire and service and the emergency medical service is good for the people of the Virgin Islands. It is good for you, and it's good for me. It's good enough for anyone to find themselves in their fortunate situation where they need an ambulance. My commissioners, directors, and I have met with the unions and the employees from fire and EMS on multiple occasions. From those meetings, it was clear as day that an integration of these services is the best way forward to provide more efficient and effective emergency response across the territory. Our fire stations have the capacity to accommodate EMS, and our firefighters have excelled in the emergency medical response certification courses. And both fire and EMS employees have demonstrated a passion for delivering the best service possible to their friends and neighbors, the people of the Virgin Islands. See, we are not reinventing the wheel.
- 1:34:41 This merger is in accordance with a well-established and growing movement toward shared services worldwide it demonstrates a commitment to the public safety by decreasing emergency response time through the strategic deployment of fire and EMS personnel from 10 additional locations throughout the territory senators no one should die waiting for an ambulance One more measure before this body is legalization of adult-use cannabis. The Cannabis Advisory Board selected an executive director, Hannah Cardy, who began working on January 3rd. Her experience in the Department of Agriculture as its administrator of the hemp program positions her to be a driving force in regulating the cannabis industry. The Office of Cannabis Regulation is presenting the proposed rules and regulations for the medicinal cannabis program to the public next month. While this is progress, I would be remiss to not point out that the current medicinal cannabis law does not address the social inequities resulting from the arrest and incarceration of those who used marijuana in the past. It does not provide an opportunity to those who were marginalized for decades and it does nothing for the young budding entrepreneurs who want to enter this industry it certainly does not provide a revenue stream to the government in fact it costs us money we all learned in denver
- 1:36:33 that there is so much more we can do in the cannabis industry and we are leaving too much opportunity on the table. I remind you my senators, we already have a cannabis industry. It's just not regulated and we get no tax from it. It is time, it is past time, for us to give serious consideration to completing what we have started, and to not let this opportunity pass us by. The COVID-19 pandemic has without question disrupted the Virgin Islands Department of Education's normal operations, and impacted the quality of teaching and learning for the past three school years. Our students have been challenged in so many ways, Along with our parents, during this time, we have expressed concerns regarding absenteeism from classes, low academic performance, and quite simply, social and emotional disconnect that you have. And the challenge is accessing technology, physical and social isolation by social distancing has severely impacted our children.
- 1:38:00 especially those that are suffering with existing depression and anxiety issues. The department, however, has done its best to overcome these challenges and provide a quality learning experience for all our students. See, while COVID has been a distraction, it has not dominated all of our attention. Last year, the Ivana-e-Dorakan Central and Charlotte Amali High Schools all receive full accreditation for the next seven years from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.
- 1:38:40 Congratulations to my school accreditation teams and the teachers on the administrators who guided this process. This is indeed a major accomplishment. I know what you're asking. What happened to the complex? Well, the St. Croix Educational Complex will begin their reaccreditation process this school year believe it or not graduation rates have actually trended upwards over the last three years 62.6% in 2019 70.9% in 2020 and 71.4% in 2021 in May of 2021 the department successfully graduated 723 students territory-wide from our high school. And we have made available to each and every one of those graduates pursuing a post-secondary education, a \$1,000 stipend to address pandemic-related hardships that may have been poured. We continue to develop and expand our public pre-K programs, our pre-kindergarten. To date, eight pre-K classrooms are now fully operational, six of which were open during the current COVID-19 pandemic.
- 1:40:01 See, we have maintained an emphasis on school readiness as part of this administration's cradle-to-career strategic focus. Lieutenant Governor Roach and I want to make sure that every child that enters our school system is duly prepared for success. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate two young aviation students. Lord knows we need pilots. Carlos Alexander and Silius Gordon. They recently completed their first solo flights last October. They are part of the aviation program at our St. Croix Career and Technical Center.
- 1:40:40 These young men are well on their ways to career as pilots and develop those skills right here through the opportunities made available by the Department of Education. I also want to acknowledge their instructor and my good friend, Ira Williams. We call him something else. I wouldn't say that tonight. Who has led the Sea Tech Aviation Academy since 2012. So despite the issues posed by the pandemic, There are great things still happening at our schools. However, we do

have a continued concern about the level of academic proficiency demonstrated by our students in general. It's not a new thing. According to our most recent standardized test result, 22.3% of third graders performed on grade level in reading and only 16.9% in math. While this is actually an improvement, believe it or not, from our pre-COVID-era scores and evidence that the department's targeted academic interventions are working, it is still well below the level of performance that we aspire for for our children. There's still much work to do to get all students on to their grade level in terms of reading.

1:42:11 So we have allocated \$1.5 million in each district to the community foundations for numeracy and literacy programs that keep students engaged and after school and weekends and during the summer. These funds are being sub-granted to programs across the territory to further this mission to promote academic excellence. The Department of Education is also the recipient of over \$138 million in funding through the American Rescue Plan. A considerable portion of those funds have been dedicated to supporting the implementation of these interventions that have been working, such as the summer enrichment, comprehensive after-school programs, and what about extended school year programs?

1:42:54 Those are added in as well. See significant resources have also been dedicated to ensuring that such learning respond to the social, emotional, and the mental health needs of our students in both our public and private schools. But the physical condition of our school campuses remains of paramount concerns. Our schools were badly damaged by the hurricanes in 27, but they were also afflicted by years of deferred maintenance, and most are simply just showing their age. We are very proud this year to unveil the new 9th grade annex at the Charlotte and Mali High School. It is the first glimpse into what modern school construction will look like in the Virgin Islands. The facility has been retrofitted to include expandable classroom with movable walls, private reading rooms, natural lighting, and increased visibility to monitor students inside and outside of the class. The other school modernization projects will follow similar design standards and include other sustainable elements like renewable energy and efficient lighting. Repairs to the Gladys Abrams School are now nearing completion. This will be home to the new Raphael O. Wheatley skills centers and the hub of career and technical real career and technical education in this district on the island of St. Thomas while awaiting FEMA's response on the level of repairs that will be allowable the department has proceeded with the initial design for reconstruction or modernization of five schools Charlotte Amali High Central High Julia Sproul BCB Bertha Sheba Shelter and Arthur Richards. FEMA has authorized full replacement of 10 buildings on four campuses with more than 50 requests still pending the response. But what FEMA did, they did approve the funding for a \$242 million project for the rebuilding of Arthur A. Richards, a K-8 school on St. Croix. The contract for construction has already been awarded. The demolition of old Evelyn Williams Elementary School is in progress and makes a way for the brand new Arthur Richards. The new school is expected to break ground before the end of the year and makes the first complete school reconstruction since the storm. It will fully demonstrate the standards for new school construction established by the Department of Education's Master Facilities Plan.

1:45:19 While virtual learning has continued for the 4th through 12th grade student populations, Our students in pre-kindergarten through third grade, special education, and our career and technical education students have been fully back to school since September of the school year. This semester, starting today, however, will mark the first time since the arrival of COVID that all public schools in the Virgin Islands will be open for in-person learning. it's not easy I was out there today and it's not easy but the department continues to provide resources such as personal protective equipment cleaning supplies spray cleaners touchless fixtures wash stations bottle fill stations and plexiglass for desks all in an effort to just keep our children safe and minimize the spread of COVID throughout the course of the pandemic the department has had to work hand in glove with the Department of Health in concert to ensure that the decisions that were made in the best interest of first the student, the faculty, and the staff for the safety of our school campuses. Thank you, Commissioner Raquel Berry-Benjamin and all the soldiers, all the soldiers in the VIDE family. Thank you.

1:46:49 We continue to invest in our workforce and our young people, especially those in heart to fill vacancies in our government. This year we launched a financial fellows program to provide opportunities for young Virgin Islanders to return home and receive training and jobs in the government of the Virgin Islands. The fellowship program is the first of its kind in the territory and provides two years of on-the-job training and work experience within the various financial agencies of our government and a reasonably competitive salary of \$55,000 per year. We don't do this because we have to.

1:47:30 We do this because our young people deserve meaningful investments to be made in the future of their success. Not just lip service. They deserve an opportunity to return to their home and to contribute to their community. Our commitment to young people is truly from cradle to career. Now, in 2019, when I first addressed the Senate, I shared my desire to establish a long-term economic vision for the entire territory, one that was devoid of politics. We didn't need politics in it.

- 1:48:22 But this past year, the Virgin Islands Economic Development Authority unveiled Vision 2040. It's a community-based economic development and community revitalization plan. This plan lays out a 20-year economic strategy for the U.S. Virgin Islands. It's all encompassed in eight aspirational goals that we all know and live that we need to achieve. Increase locally grown and sourced food. Become a blue economy research center. Forge new pathways in health and health sciences. Support our entrepreneurs and give them access to capital. increase our population, become a renewable energy community, deliver a world-class education system, and optimize our tourism product to our culture.
- 1:49:22 For those of you who had had the opportunity to review the plan, you may have noticed that much of what I have discussed tonight revolves around supporting those eight goals. It is our mission to continue to align the administration's policies with the goals embodied in Vision 2040. I want to thank the over 3,000 Virgin Islanders, both at home and abroad, that provided input into this plan by participating in surveys and focus groups. It was truly a community-based effort that reflects the consensus of our diversified viewpoints. I thank Wayne Biggs and the EDA for bringing this effort together. The efforts of the University of the Virgin Islands Research and Technology Park exemplifies the innovation that will ultimately transform our economy. Within the last year, they have launched the Catalyst Fund, the Tech Village Development, a technology accelerator, and the Visa Plus talent recruitment site, Peter Chapman and his young, talented staff continue to ably advance the vision of this administration.
- 1:50:47 If there is one canary in this coal mine that we should really pay attention to, it is a result of the 2020 census population count. One of the aspirational goals of Vision 2040 is to increase the population of the Virgin Islands by 10%. But this goal was established before we revealed that the population has actually decreased by 18% to 87,000 people. That means to achieve the population target that Vision 2040 aspires to, the population must now grow by approximately 30,000 people.
- 1:51:28 This has major implications for our ability to keep this recovery on track. We can't find people now. Spurring population growth is critical to spurring economic growth here in the territory. The population has to be large enough to generate the level of commercial activity that our businesses rely on. Simply put, fewer people means fewer customers. Our workforce also depends on population growth. We are currently in the midst of a labor shortage. Furthermore, the RAND Corporation published a report in 2020 that said that we would eventually need an additional 5,520 workers to sustain the recovery effort. That's just to get this work done. The loss of population also means shrinking tax base. An erosion of the tax revenues collected by the government will effectively result in a reduction in the ability for the government to provide services. We have to identify strategies and policies that will help reverse this population decline.
- 1:52:35 Now, Lieutenant Governor Roach and I entered the responsibility with a clear plan for attaining the quality of life we aspire to as Virgin Islanders. And as I stand here tonight, I am pleased because the results of our approach to governance are becoming increasingly evident. We have gained greater momentum each year. We have been in office. We have paid \$96 million in income tax refund.
- 1:53:05 We have paid and repaid the 8% VAYESA payroll cut to the tune of \$41.5 million. We have paid \$10 million in retroactive wages owed to the former public sector employees. And we paid over \$1 million to correct the pay owed to the National Guardsmen for their service following the 2017 storm. This is a total of almost \$150 million in past-due obligations, all paid from the Treasury of the U.S. Virgin Islands without borrowing a single dime. Ladies and gentlemen of the Virgin Islands and senators, that is what we have done. Together, in just the last 12 months. I don't remember a time, and maybe you do, the last time our government was able to address the magnitude of financial obligations in such a short period of time. Senators, this is something that we all should be proud of. Economies are cyclical, but our territory is undeniably on an upswing. Not even the headwinds of hurricanes and pandemics have deterred our progress.
- 1:54:46 In fact, they have bolstered our resolve. They have strengthened our efforts and provided the resources that have spurred our initiatives. I do not speak to you this evening with rose-colored glasses. As I said earlier, there is still much work to be done. The social ills that have compromised our quality of life still require our dedicated focus on our attention. We are now confronted with new headwinds for our community, created by the rising cost of living and hard-to-find housing driven by all of the inflation.
- 1:55:29 Let us not be fooled. We are only at the beginning of our journey to sound footing. But we have stabilized the finances of our government and begun the serious work of diversifying our economy and strengthening our private sector. We are laying a solid foundation to our future. See, this is indeed an exciting time to be a Virgin Islander. There are wonderful opportunities permeating throughout our community. But to appreciate them, but to appreciate them, we must not succumb to the usual cynicism and pessimism. Realizing greater progress and increased prosperity Is a community project It's not something for us and them We all must do our part As leaders and especially as citizens See, we all want the best for the Virgin Islands So senators, if we put aside Our personal ambitions and our individual agendas just long enough we can achieve greater results for the people of the Virgin Islands Lieutenant Governor Roach and I are confident

of this so let us move forward on a path together that builds on a trust that the people have placed in us to govern with competence and integrity there is so, so much more that I left out of this speech all of the things that we have accomplished together that I could have reported on tonight but for the past year I've been promising people that this year's address would not be as long as the previous year yet another promise that I made that I have now kept once again I am grateful for the opportunity to address you all this evening God bless you

1:57:39 And God bless our Virgin Islands. Love you. Thank you.

1:58:39 Thank you. Thank you.

1:59:39 Thank you. Sergeant at Arms, please escort the Chief Justice and the Judge Willocks. Presiding judge, out of the chambers, thank you, and the clergy, yes, yes, you may be seated. This evening we want to thank the governor of the United States of Virgin Islands for presenting to us the fourth state of the territory address to the 34th legislature of the Virgin Islands and to the people of the United States of Virgin Islands. I want to give special thank-yous to the executive director of the legislature, central staff employees, and the governance team, and all individuals involved to ensure that we could have been here this evening.

2:01:12 Once the session is adjourned, those sitting in the front will leave first, and the other rules will follow suit in order please get home safely and god bless you all the legislative session of january 24th 2022 is hereby adjourned . Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. We'll be right back. Oh, my God. Thank you. Thank you. Oh, my God. Thank you. Thank you.

2:07:48 Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

2:09:48 Thank you. .

2:10:48 Let's do it. Thank you.

2:11:48 Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

2:13:18 We'll be right back. Thank you. [2 such phrases repeated 10 times · standby audio before the proceeding, transcribed by the recogniser as speech]

2:18:18 a good night madam president good evening to you yes ma'am the governor said a lot tonight But I was wondering, what's your impression overall?

2:18:52 I think that the governor talked a lot about his accomplishments, about the way forward in the territory. But he was very short on discussing or sharing with the people of the Virgin Islands his strategy as it relates to the challenges that we are faced with here in the Virgin Islands. I thought I would have heard more about where we were going with education, education, our healthcare system, we have issues within our Department of Human Services. So we didn't hear those things. And I thought that in that particular area, those areas, the speech was lacking. You know, he ended by talking about him not wearing rose glasses. But we really needed to hear more about the challenges and where we're going as a territory and how we're going to, I mean did talk a lot about collaboration which was which is excellent which is fine right but what was definitely noticeably missing was sharing the challenges that we're experiencing and how we're going to begin to address those challenges as a territory and in your experience uh you consider those issues critical to the virgin islands well absolutely um you know we heard some some uh discussions around infrastructure of course the infrastructure discussion we didn't hear anything about what's happening with charlton molly high school i see and the rebuilding of chs and um you know our children has been our seniors our high schoolers they've been displaced for a very long time and you know it i think it's so important for us to hear what was the status on charlton molly high school what's the status on the uh the cancer center here in st thomas we we didn't hear that okay and people want to know that right and that's very

2:20:45 important because you said a couple of days ago what about plans surrounding education the economy infrastructure ongoing recovery efforts and improvement to our health care system did you hear anything addressed like that well we heard a about the the accomplishments what they consider it as accomplishments but again I have to repeat it I didn't get for instance let's just talk about education you know we heard about you know for years we've been hearing about students reading on grade level and the fix in clearly the the Commission of Education's mind based on his delivery this evening is that we utilize some one point something million dollars to the Community foundations in the Virgin Islands to assist with reading and renumeracy. That's not enough. That's not enough. We have to ensure that our K-3 teachers in the territory are in fact trained. This institution, I think in the 33rd legislature, I was successful in moving legislation to ensure that our K-3 teachers in the territory are trained up to ensure that we are able to see an improvement in our kids reading understandable yes senator i got about one minute left for you you do yes well you saw five minutes go fast right but critically for me and for the community as president of the legislature going into a critical uh campaign mode are you

planning um to that aspect of um questioning or sponsor legislation to address some of the things that that the governor mentioned yes um very interested um he talked about the eight percent and uh

2:22:37 not the eight percent he talked about the return of the retro of the retroactive and um i actually submitted legislation uh along with uh senator francis to begin to address the retroactivity um he talked about the retirees and i really believe that you know uh a few years ago legislation was passed around the the retirees and their um the little extra change that i got the cola if you will right the cost of living and um we have to restore that and it can't be every whenever the the um the lottery has enough money we have to make it a priority here within this institution so we don't have legislation around that um and um and um madam president i know you're going to do what you say they're going to do but i want to thank you very much uh for a well um run um territorial address from the perspective of the senate thank you very much thank you and i appreciate that and we look forward to continue to work with the governor because his his speech was high on um collaboration and i look forward to collaborating with him along with my colleagues so we can truly truly work on improving the lives of the people of the virgin islands and really setting aside our differences and focusing on why we're here as elected leaders so thank you thank you ma'am yes and of course ladies and gentlemen on the our viewers we have of course uh my co-host uh africa and she of course will be interviewing that's who you will be interviewing tonight

2:24:36 okay the vice president yes i will be interviewing vice president novella e francis jr okay welcome mr vice president Senator Francis, how are you tonight? Good evening, Africa. I'm fine. Thank you. How are you? I'm doing wonderful. What were your thoughts on the Governor's State of the Territory address? Well, first of all, let me take this opportunity to really commend all our first responders. I think it's a critical time where they have really stepped up despite the pandemic and continue to put their life on the line for this community, so I want to take this time to really commend them. I also want to, again, offer condolences to all of those individuals that passed away over the last year. My comments to the Governor's State of the Territory address, obviously, he's upbeat. He spoke a lot about some of his success story. I thought that he was a little bit light in respect to some of the challenges that we're experiencing. I think that the community were really hoping to hear from him how we intend to address those challenges that confront us. me of course behavioral health is very near and dear to my heart and legislation I've been pushing forward I thought that I didn't hear much certainly about behavioral health so yes he had some some high points but certainly those those challenging aspects of it was a little bit weak.

2:26:01 I'm pretty interested in knowing your response to this next question. The temporary replacement of the Governor Juan F. Louis hospital also known as the JFL North. As you know the governor stated that it's frustratingly slow to completion. What are your thoughts on the progress so far? Well, the GFL, of course, is our primary hospital, and certainly the individuals on St. Croix desperately in need of having a hospital facility. I felt that the governor, as the leader of this territory, was, while he was frustrated, I don't think that he have done enough to really push the issue of making sure that those individuals are responsible to get the job done. Yes, you could be frustrated, but at the end of the day, we really need to move the needle, understanding the priority, understanding that we're in a crisis, a medical crisis. Certainly, the JFL should be a top priority on your list in getting that going. And we have to remove the barriers that prevent us from being able to get the JFL North opened and be available to the members of this community, St. Croix community, that is.

2:27:11 In terms of vaccinations and how the governor handled the COVID-19 pandemic that started March of 2020, how would you rate the performance thus far? The governor did a good job. I think his team, certainly the COVID task force, the governor response task force did a good job in terms of handling the pandemic situation. Where we can see where we have a significant number of our community, 62% that have already been vaccinated. And we know that as we move towards herd immunity, again, we will continue to see at least less of an impact in terms of the COVID and the positive that we're experiencing in our community. So we, you know, I believe that the governor will get a, in my opinion, for really handling the pandemic situation that we're experiencing.

2:27:59 Was there anything in particular that the governor did not mention tonight that you was looking forward to hearing? Again, I believe that mental health and behavioral health was critical. did mention um our seniors of the commission on the aging and that there is a healthcare facility that will be open um in the stony ground area i think that we need more than just the 98 a room um for our seniors that is that that that is a critical area we have an aging community and and certainly um a lot of them that's being challenged by by illnesses and certainly we need a senior assisted living facility um you know throughout the territory but but certainly not just one in the Frederick State area but I would like to see us you know capitalize and maybe perhaps one in the middle of the island as well as one in the Christian State area as well in addition to Christian said do you believe that there should be more mental health facilities territory-wide as well yes yeah we certainly uh me we know see the crisis that we're experiencing um we have a tremendous especially when we talk about our students you know I believe that there because of them being kind of cased up for so long and their inability to socialize that it is creating some severe depression on them. We need to make sure that we have appropriate counselors.

We need to make sure that we have appropriate facilities to be able to provide the necessary care and therapy that they'll require.

- 2:29:27 Thank you, Senator Francis, for joining me on this interview tonight. Thank you very much for having me. Have a good night. You too. so coming up next of course the governor had many discussions he spoke about education he spoke about infrastructure the governor did a fantastic job also describing the covid 19 pandemic all the progress that we've made so far and um joining me is my co-host winston how are you that was an excellent interview and of course thank you of course you asked the pertinent questions and i like that very much coming up next is the uh freshman senator who is Genevieve Whittaker of course good evening good evening Mr. Nugent and it's also you are chairwoman of the committee on educational workforce development I'm going to zero in on the governor's speech regarding the canopy of your responsibility what do you think of the speech by the way well I thought that the governor was rather ambitious in nature but I I do want to state that he in instances where I mean where credit was given it was really wasn't it wasn't down so many was I expected him to express more vision of the shortcomings of some of his leaders. Where in his speech did he actually address a certain amount of your concerns as chairwoman of your committee? In the case of education,
- 2:31:17 there still continues to be work. My constituents continue to read out to us around the concern about reopening. There's been a lot of a lack of really engagement with the stakeholders, meaning that a lot of concerns by parents the administrators themselves as well as the school readiness I heard that we we know that you know schools are supposed to have all the equipment and supplies but as I listen and as I listen to my concern the concerns as we sit today there's even concerns about the equipment being ready on basic supplies at schools we have concerns about you we have water issues we have a number of issues on the school campuses that as school starts started this week um we're not um we're not addressed i read somewhere in the um the daily news that for two years we have been experiencing the covid pandemic and that should have given the education department some leeway in terms of repairs and they are complaining that some schools are leaking and of course uh they're not repaired what do you think of that well it's for me it's been a a journey of a year we're asking for information about the progress about the monies received from fema about the covid monies and use of it for those very same dollars um should have been used to actually get persons to help ready the facilities learning loss i've been covering that for months at a time and through hearings and efforts um to support students who have learned me and we heard tonight the 20 that our children at reading level are 22 percent we also heard that that they are at 16 at reading level for math we have a crisis and i've been speaking to the commissioner and her leadership team about the crisis and why why do you think
- 2:33:13 this crisis came up is this a result of the uh covid or is it a lack from the education department participating in entities that school children could learn i it's it's twofold it's both on the the fact that the pandemic exacerbated it only added to what was already a problem with curriculum and an instruction in the context of you know students being able to who are falling behind even before the pandemic we had students who weren't reading at the great well reading a math the grade level and with that I have engaged the commissioner over you know providers my biggest push is for after-school programming and we have now even you know monies that they are set to receive and they have received to drive down intervention but all throughout this last year into into this year they've had the funds to ready the school at least safety wise and they've We've also had levels of funding to support programming. Well, Senator Whitaker, I've got 30 seconds left for you. What's your plan as the chairwoman of that committee to address some of the things that the governor didn't mention?
- 2:34:28 You've got 30 seconds. Well, what this year I'm going to really drill down on planning and strategy. We lack commitment to moving strategically forward and to hold the department and education accountable. And I'll do that by driving home the need to, for once, submit to this legislature several plans as it pertains to all the legislation, particularly the dropout prevention plan that has yet to arrive here. The school accountability report that requires facilities to be managed and maintained. And we're going to continue to drive that home along with my committee members. Thank you very much, Senator. And I want to tell you that I appreciate the fact that you are doing these things for the children. And, of course, I want to say best for the rest of the year. Thank you. Thank you. You're welcome. Thank you. Good night.
- 2:35:17 Yes. And once again, I'm bringing in back my host, Africa. And, Africa, tell me, who you have coming up next? Who I have coming up next is our Senate Majority Leader, Senator Marvin Blyden. Okay. I want to welcome Senator Blyden to the mic. senator how are you tonight hi africa i'm good i'm blessed and yourself i'm doing pretty well so what were your thoughts on the governor's speech it was a pretty upbeat upbeat speech um very um promising very optimistic but um all in all um it was upbeat speech basically yeah definitely had a lot of positives in there but I would like to speak to you specifically about the housing as you know that the housing industry was strong as sales territory-wide had a growth rate of 31 percent however due to the COVID-19 pandemic of course the sales were affected what are your thoughts on the governor's mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic by making and having a lot more vaccines available to public do you

think that through the mitigation efforts if the housing market will now regain and grow again well i honestly believe that the housing market here in the territory continues to go um rapidly uh i see a lot of movement you see a lot of construction and development every single day in every neighborhood so despite the pandemic it's slowed down a little yes but um i believe it will rebound and continue to go ahead in the territory it's a good market to basically building um i would also like to get your opinion on the envision program how would you rate it one being poor and ten being the highest meaning excellent well the envision or e-wrap

2:37:14 emergency rental system program um the the envision program i'll say probably a six about the ERAP program, I'll give it a 4 to a 5, reason being many individuals call my office on a regular basis and since the moratorium have expired December 31st, I believe I will be reaching out to the governor to extend the moratorium for the next 30 to 45 days. Reason being there are many people in our program who have gone through the process, have gotten paid but still they are not finished with the process and they're in the process of been evicted because I get called on a regular basis so it's critical that we assist those individuals because what it does it helps with the pandemic in terms of them having not having to go and live with other individuals or other family members which helps us spread the disease I think it's important that we extend a moratorium and not only for renters but also for homeowners also because there are other programs that help our homeowners during these difficult time. So it's critical that we really extend the moratorium. I'll be returning to the governor in that respect. In previous legislatures that you've served, I had an opportunity to attend many of the housing tours that you've done. Where are we with the progress then and how are we now? Well finally, FEMA have released many funds to assist, as you heard the governor spoke, in the state of territories, many of the different communities with many repairs that have been pending for many years and I'm happy to see that the residents are finally getting some type of relief when it comes to them living in supposedly decent, safe, and sanitary housing. So at least the Housing Authority is starting to actually live by those words. So I'm happy for the resident in that respect. How satisfied are you with the progression of the construction of the hurricane-damaged

2:39:05 housing communities? Well, like I said, as we know that the process, FEMA takes some time in terms of going through the red tape but I would say I'm not very satisfied but I'm happy to see that there's progress moving forward and I'm happy to see that within those progress many of the locals are getting work I mean my contractors are getting work so I'm happy to see all in all development and work being done to assure that our residents are in safe sanitary decent housing. Senator, was there anything in particular that the governor did not mention tonight that you were looking forward to hearing? Yes, when it comes to the students, our students, and I'm happy that we use some type of common sense. I finally got them back in the school when it comes to testing everyone, but what I would have loved to hear is what they are doing about the many individuals with these computers and equipments and the connectivity in order for them to keep up, especially they think they're already behind and they've been at home for some time now, what is being done to assist those individuals in terms of getting caught up and being able to do their work at home and be able to stay in tune and stay up with the other peers throughout the United States.

2:40:20 Thank you, Senator, for this interview tonight. And thank you for the time and have a blessed evening. You too. Coming up next, of course, my lovely co-host, Winston. thank you very much dear as i said one more wonderful interview with senator blyden and of course uh coming up next is that senator degraft and he's a senator that i appreciate in the senator senator welcome senator thank you very much no senator i know you's um you are um a harmony man and of course you're frisky frisky yeah so let me ask you a frisky question sure um senator grap you heard what the governor's um said in his speech tonight what's your general view well uh i i think the governor mentioned a lot of great things i give my a plus on the how he dealt with covid but uh you know all the monies that were giving back the eight percent and everything but i was a little perplexed in the ending when he started to talk about the census and we lost it would take about 30 000 people to boost our population you were talking about he's speaking about the repopulation of virgin island population i heard that did you get the impression that he's speaking about we bringing back virgin islands to come back to the virgin lands to work and so forth and that's what i wanted to clear because i see i could see that as a door opening for anybody to come in and uh fill a gap in the territory and then we start to lose our virgin island base and things that we could provide for virgin islanders make incentives for them to come back home that's a very good point so in other words you did not uh heard anything from him where he's specifically gonna guarantee right that virgin islanders would get these jobs correct or incentive to come back exactly uh you don't

2:42:19 have the opportunities for homes and everything so you know i was looking at that and uh you know again the in health care cancer treatment the charlotte kimmerman center i would like to have heard something along the lines of the progress and that because again we have a lot of virgin islands who have to leave for health care in regards to cancer and some don't make it back home so at least if you're going to get your treatment and and and grow from that you know it should be at least home but you know so something like that it was a good speech for an accomplishments terms of things that he did in his time frame in one year so one of your pet peeve in the senate i did not hear uh i did not hear him speak

of um your pet fee the veterans exactly uh you know with the veterans there are so much services for the veterans again i would like to have heard different things too whereas again the national guard that was able to get paid for compensation from that 2017 hurricanes uh was a bill that i i was uh the sponsor had passed in the 33rd so now they can be adequately paid and for for their services that they render you know so that's a plus but again more services for the veterans also well senator i got 30 minutes 30 seconds left tell me have you any plan to address certain issues that he spoke about tonight yes i have legislation in for uh gun parts coming into the territory to address the gun violence in the territory and before i close you know i'd like to put out a condolence to all the persons who have lost their life from covid uh thank you to the first responders and the person essential workers who came out to provide services during this detrimental time of covid so you know you know thanks gratitude moment of silence you know and uh thank you for the interview and i'm thanking you very much senator at the graph and i wish you the best going down to of course the election period thank you very much highly appreciate it you're welcome sir once again of course i have africa here

2:44:29 coming this time celine interview winston and who do you have this time africa coming up next we have senator all my friends is highlight oh the freshman senator of course the voice welcome senator halligan yes ma'am senator welcome how are you tonight good evening good evening i'm pretty okay so what were your thoughts on the governor's speech well i think for me this evening i do appreciate all the things the governor did share as to our accomplishments but overall i think it was a lot of fluff and i really thought that we needed to dive in to a lot of more things that really had to deal with what the people of this territory is interested about specifically like what well there were several things that i really wanted to hear in depth about for example we have been blessed to have gotten three quarters of a billion dollars as it relates to covet funds i really wanted to hear a lot more as to how we as a people and him as the governor would be investing and really putting out this half a billion of our funds you know i want to definitely thank all the people during this pandemic that went out that will be sharing a part of the 40 million dollars that we're going to be giving to public and private sector individuals that really came to the call of duty during that time period but at the end of the day i have to really pay attention to what's happening to our residents and there was a lot more things i really wanted to hear um certain things he talked about in the state of the territory for example he mentioned a section where he said that we potentially need to go do a refinance to go and pay VTOL more money. Listen, that literally put me in shock because we got a scathing report from the Inspector General as to a potential situation where over a hundred and million dollars we had issues with with that contract. There's a lot of issues around that contract. So as a representative of the people, I don't see myself just jumping in and saying, hey, let's go refinance to pay them without us really getting an opportunity to investigate as a body what happened with all that money well if refinancing is not the answer then what is the answer for me is at the end of the day

2:47:01 we were supposed to have a committee of the whole on the 11th of this month which has been postponed and i'm looking forward to have that conversation about that scathing vital report because at the end of the day i have to understand where the people's money went i am not going to say our solution is to go refinance to go give them money when there could have been activities involved in that that could have taken away from the very way the people of this territory have been paying their bills and potential savings could be realized because of it moving away from that topic a little bit something new and exciting is happening soon we'll be returning to in-person learning for the educators so what do you think about that Well, I have a ninth grader in my household that has been an interesting experience with her dealing with virtual schooling. And I saw the benefits of it, but I also saw the distractions of it and her need to be in school with peers and having direct learning. And I am looking forward to our students do heading back to the classroom, but in a safe way. As you saw over the weekend, they had to deal with covet testing and going through the process and thousands of students were tested you know in my office we got a lot of calls from constituents very concerned about the process and the long waits and you know i thought personally it could have been started a little bit early and broken up a little bit more because like for example with my niece who lives with me there was almost 600 students showing up for her one day so it was an interesting situation but all in all you know as the students got tested um i got back the results via email it was it was an interesting process but i think heading back to the classroom i think would be positive

2:48:54 for these children senator thank you so much for your take on the governor's speech tonight definitely and thank you so much you're welcome have a good night have a blessed evening so coming up next we have winston i want to thank you one more time again for that wonderful interview and who do you have coming up next i have um the freshman senator from frederickstead the one and only senator johnson frankie johnson i look forward to hearing your interviews and of course as you know he's a fiery senator oh absolutely and he's building up a reputation in st croix right now that you can rely on him senator frankie johnson go ahead sees me hanging good evening good evening senator johnson my first question you know when i was listening to the governor's speech he said something that to me he was talking about you not negatively but an issue that you um really really taking on but before that give me your overall impression of the governor's speech tonight um good evening again to you and good evening to the people at the territory um the governor

was very upbeat but i still feel there was a lot left out and there's one thing that that brought great concern to me that thing about population growth oh and why that brought great concern to me our population will continue decreasing if our health care is not in better condition for elderly population that we have here i say so people continue having to live in the territory for health care so how do we grow the population without thinking about our seniors without making sure that the health care is up to

2:50:50 status and up to date so i you know i i have a little issue with that but i can tell you we'll continue going down right but in reference to that let me go back to that because that strike me not as strange but it strike me i've not well developed i had the impression that the governor was saying that he wants to bring back virgin islanders probably who went to college and working in america or leave the island because there was no job available and he's going to find a way to bring them back by of course boosting the economy didn't you get that impression from that get that in a sense but you also have to be compatible because if you're talking about bringing them back for jobs you know the wages are very low that's the cost of living is high that's correct and i think you started alluding to that envision program which was the biggest disaster i i go to people home on a regular base and i have to listen to folks complain about this disaster with this envision program i know family that are that died and now the relatives are being told their home will not be repaired okay so that is that is something very dear to me when i see that the seniors that are out there depending on this envision program that has been just a failure i got you i have one one minute uh for you but i want to ask you this question you heard him speak about the uh petroleum aisle refinery coming back uh what did you think of that you know it's it's a good and it's it has its mixed picture to it because the people that live on the western end of the island is continuously complaining about the pollution and and if it's not done right with everything in place to make sure that the people are protected from any exposure i'm not in support of it i see so we definitely got to make sure that dpnr and all of those have all the air quality control monitors and everything in place without that i won't support that initiative at all i happen to live on the west so i have to feel a brunt of that population so in other words i

2:52:53 suppose you're going to monitor this um as a sitting senator definitely will be monitoring and paying attention to it one of the things that i felt he didn't even discuss the bureau correction here that i came from when you listen to the people in blue who work there they're going through a rough time in that place and not to mention the prisoners who are in that bad condition it's very serious and those are things that i wanted to hear about what's what's his take what action or what direction he's going to go with bringing that place back under control very important point and i want to thank you very much senator johnson and i'm looking forward to hear your voice of choice in the senate for the next two years most evidently it's a pleasure seeing here again Thank you, sir. Thank you very much.

2:53:36 And, of course, as you said, Senator Johnson is from the west of Frederickstead, and, of course, Africa. Welcome back again. Thank you. And whom do you have this time? Coming up next, we have Senator, our freshman Senator, Carla Joseph. Carla Joseph. Okay. Yes, Ms. Carla Joseph. Welcome, Senator Joseph. And, of course, she is, of course, a freshman. Absolutely. Senator thank you so much for joining us tonight how are you doing I am really thankful to for this opportunity to be here and to again hear the second state of the territory addressed by governor adult Albert Bryan jr. no it's not his second but do believe this is fourth well this is for me the second I'll be here and as a senator so yes this is oh I for I see in his first term but for me being in the well as an elected official this is my second now speaking of his state of the territory address what were your thoughts on it I thought he was very vivacious in his delivery he maintained a lot of eye contact he stressed on some of the important points like his partnership with the legislature to be able to pay the eight percent increase uh to pay out a number of tax returns to our people i i really appreciated that as well as a lot of road projects that have been uh funded by this body and i've co-sponsored some of those and the rt park i've given great kudos on being able to talk about partnerships and working together with a legislative body to get things done absolutely now you are a champion for the aging what were your thoughts on the governor's speech

2:55:35 as it pertains to the aging population well i'm a champion for not only the aging but for the young people our young people well the aging population he didn't go in depth on a lot of the things that i know is really plaguing our aging population of course health care is there but also we really are in need of skilled nursing facility assisted nursing facilities home health care he did mention that they're looking at beefing up their retention and recruitment effort of healthcare professionals so that was good that helps with the other demographic idea which is young people to assure that we are providing those level of opportunities for our young people to flourish and be productive citizens here while we march forward into this century. In addition to being a strong advocate for the Asian population and the young people like you just mentioned, in terms of the vocational school studies and the academia studies, what were your thoughts on the governor's speech as it pertains to those topics? I think he was a little bit vague in how that is should occur uh coming from my background being a vocational principal if you would put that in perspective providing second opportunities for our young people to earn their high school diplomas as well as construction certification or career pathway certification it's critical that we start in the schools in the high schools get our young people certified and then move them straight into

jobs that are available they should be using allied health in the schools in the high school not only at the ctech but for adult learners but also for those young people in the high school career pathways and in high school who are currently enrolled so that they could complete high school have a vocational certification and then when they leave high school they're right there in a job that's what we're supposed to be looking at right now in terms of hearing was there anything in particular that the governor did not address tonight that you were looking forward to hearing

2:57:56 yes and that surrounds agriculture i heard nothing about agriculture and and for me agriculture wasn't one of my major platform pieces but it was so silent and I was surprised because he mentioned in his 2040 plan that that was something that he has as the number one feeding our people food source food resources and it was really absent I heard nothing about agriculture and we have to try to do better for agriculture because that's how we are able to sustain ourselves as a community if you can feed yourself you will be able to sustain yourself senator thank you so much for this interview tonight it's my pleasure and thank you for having me and um i want to before i go i want to definitely say kudos and huge thank you to all our first responders all our nurses doctors CNAs, healthcare professionals for the hard work that you do and also to all of our teachers and students. I really know that this is a really difficult time for us as a community, as a nation, but we have to press on regardless. Thank you so much senator thank you coming up next we have senator samuel carrion good evening good evening senator how are you doing tonight great doing good what were your thoughts on the governor's speech um I think overall his speech I guess the delivery of the speech he sounded very optimistic the governor on many spoke about how we are thriving with regard to that I think we're not there

2:59:50 yet so wouldn't clearly use the word thriving I think you know when we still have the percentage that we have of children living in families in the poverty level which is above 20% still parents and small businesses struggling there's a lot of work to be done I think we're on the pathway but there's still a lot of work to be done so I think overall he sounded very hopeful and optimistic but we have to really move the pace on how things are moving in the territory on a scale of one to ten one being poor and ten being excellent how would you rate the progress thus far in which in which area specifically like you said poverty um i i think we are maybe out of five okay yeah why again because there is still much work to be done after three years um the pace of how our recovery funds are moving um still slow You've heard, in many instances, speak about the Envision program, the schools that are to begin construction. There's a lot of red tape and bureaucracy that really holds, it's holding back the progress of what we should be seeing. I think members of our community, they want to be able to see, we're hearing about a lot of plants, but the implementation of those plants are taking too long, and that's where we need to really accelerate and really speed up the pace to get things done.

3:01:31 You opened up initially by saying that the speech was really optimistic. Anything in particular really stands out to you as far as the optimism is concerned? He mentioned about paying the retirees that are owed the wages retroactive pay which we know that that's been for decades um and they really deserve it um i want i you know i'm hopeful that that can be done that i'm i'm supporting it i just see financially how that is going to be possible it might be kind of difficult at the moment but i'm all full support um in retirees receiving what what they deserve for many years that it's been waiting the governor did mention in terms of the employee pension plan that you know we are in a financial crisis any suggestions of how we can get ourselves out of that well we've been working very hard at the fourth legislature under the leadership of senator of vla and the subcommittee that has to do with grs pension so we're very optimistic and there's a pool civilization that's coming forward to really solve and the problem that we have with grs and uh pave the way for um our pension to be insolvent and not not be in the condition that it is right now I you know another thing that kind of you know I heard tonight was with regards to the racetracks the horse racetracks he didn't sound so optimistic in that area horsemen Association the horsemen they've been struggling I think that's an area where we really need to focus attention because it also provides for young people apprenticeship programs also stimulates the economy so I really like to see a change in that area and 2023 sounds kind of too far they've been waiting for far too long so we need to really restore both uh racetracks and the territory anything in particular

3:03:22 that the governor did not talk about tonight that you were really looking forward to hearing about i i think maybe i wanted some more details in some areas in specific i think part of it was a bit vague and and he spoke a lot about um the federal funding that a lot that has been done or he is planning on doing has to do a lot with because of the federal funds that we have that are coming to the territory but i also was optimistic to hear that they have selected director for the gun violence office i believe that prevention is the key and we need to provide more programs that would bring prevention methods and would help our young people to just stay away from crime crime activities senator thank you so much for this interview tonight thank you Coming up next, of course, we have Winston.

3:04:13 Thank you, Senator Carrion. And of course, I want to thank you for giving me that little break that I needed some water. So I'm glad you take. Well, I'm definitely glad that you're nice and refreshed. Who are you interviewing next? I am interviewing right now. Coming up is the Senator at large, Senator Payne. I look forward to hearing your interview. of

course definitely welcome senator payne good evening good evening and i glad to see you glad to see you and every time i see you i said this this this gentleman is bigger than me so i guess i don't have to you know relax myself senator payne um as the large senator of course you're responsible three territories st john st thomas and st croix what's your general opinion uh tonight of the governor's uh territorial speech uh my general opinion was that a governor's speech was it was upbeat and it was one of overcoming overcoming as far as we the territory went through not one but two category five disasters not as hurricane disasters and as we are starting to come out of that here it is we are thrown into a pandemic and throughout the pandemic we even though we went to two hurricanes and the pandemic we didn't go to massive layoffs um massive shortages of any type we still persevere as a community um because of the quick thinking and quick response of department of health they were able to put things in place relative to making sure that we had testing sites we had information about the covid we even participated in the worldwide shutdown to ensure that virgin island the health of virgin island and the lives were actually spared i feel

3:06:12 that this wasn't done we would have been in a more disturbing place than we are now understandable senator i of course i get indication that i have two minutes with you left but i want to read something because i know you have addressed this issue during your committees and so forth. The Governor said VIPD has revamped and expanded the recruitment strategy while the department has seen the hiring of 63 new employees including police officers, police auxiliary, community service officer and key civilian staff. it is it is in need of hundred of officers territory wide what do you think of that yes i'm actually um i'm proud to say tonight that the person he has in charge ray martinez was my choice from day one i see he has a plan he came into the job with a plan he's implemented that plan and they actually he brought it to his man his management team and and they pass it on to the officers and the supervisors, and they're actually carrying out the plan throughout the community. We had a meeting about two or three weeks ago, and we spoke about recruiting young people in the police department as drone pilots. All the facets of technology that they have within the department, it's very attractive to young people, and that's the avenue he's utilizing towards getting young people to actually join the police department. Senator, I give you five seconds, and I want you to say, of course, I like your tenacity when you're speaking on the floor.

3:07:56 And, of course, I want to say good wishes for the rest of the Senate. Thank you very much. And to the Virgin Islands people, happy new year. God bless you all. And I look forward to seeing you all. And just help me address your concerns throughout the territory for the remainder of my time here while I'm here. Thank you very much. Senator at large. Definitely. Pleasure to see you again, my friend. Yes, sir. It's my pleasure. All the best.

3:08:22 Yes, sir. And of course, once again, Africa, you're coming up with whom this time? Yes, Winston. I'm definitely looking forward to interviewing Senator Milton E. Potter. Okay. Senator Potter. Let me tell you something about Senator Potter. He's the brother of my favorite College of the Virgin Islands classmate, Senator Potter. Can you know who is Senator? Hosbert Potter. Here comes Senator Potter. very good senator senator potter welcome how are you doing this evening whatever you're comfortable with i'm doing great thanks how are you doing i'm doing pretty good so what are your thoughts on the governor's speech um the governor has is pretty typical i think you give a state of the territory speech that is optimistic that looks at the glass as being half full rather than half empty and that has just been consistent with every state of the territory address that I've seen. So the governor was no real exception there. He gave a uplifting optimistic presentation on the state of the territory.

3:09:29 One of the things that the governor spoke about was he stated that 54,175 Virgin Islanders are vaccinated which represents 62 percent of the population as a regard regards to the census 2020. So what are your thoughts on that? I would like to see the number higher. I think the reduction in the census probably propped the number up a little bit but I think ultimately the key to us um successfully navigating our way through this pandemic is for more virgin islanders to be unvaccinated i know that's a controversial it is controversial but if you can speak to those who are unvaccinated what message would you share well i could tell you who feels it knows it my brother died as a result of COVID-19 last year he was fit he was ex i expected to grow old in a family with my brother and we lost him and he was opposed to being vaccinated.

3:10:36 Four weeks later, my brother was dead of COVID-19. So, I mean, it's no hype. It is direct experience. And I would just hope that, you know, people at the Virgin Islands don't have to learn a tough lesson and they go out and they protect themselves. One of the things in the governor's speech was he talked about the enormous unfunded liability of the employee pension system. He stated that we are in a financial crisis regarding that particular subject. What are your thoughts on that? It's true we are the system is on the verge of collapse it's no secret we've been there for the last I don't know 20 30 years we've been in this state But I think that it is great that we had an opportunity to collaborate between the legislature, the governor of the Virgin Islands, the GRS, to all be on the same page from the inception. I think that it gives us an opportunity to collectively arrive at a solution. I think that is something that is going to be on the horizon, and we'll

be able to alleviate the stress and anxiety that many of our senior citizens are living with right now with this doom and gloom, the whole impending insolvency of the system. So this brings some hope, and I think it's a realistic opportunity for us to fix this system.

3:12:13 the governor also mentioned that in october of 2021 you know the the job market has definitely increased since then about 95 percent of course you know the covet 19 pandemic definitely took a major hit on the job market in the u.s virgin islands how do you feel about where it is now um i think the governor has done a pretty steady job of balancing um the economy versus health and safety and making adjustments along the way. It is good that the numbers have bounced back, the numbers of jobs that we lost, but I think one thing that he mentioned in the presentation was that there was a need for some 5,000 plus persons to join the employment rules in order for us to be able to rebuild the territory post-hurricanes Oma and Maria. Although 95% of the jobs have returned, we still need a whole lot more to really begin to do justice to the recovery process.

3:13:23 Was there anything in particular that the Governor did not mention tonight that you were looking forward to hearing? I definitely would have liked him to speak a little bit more about agriculture, where we are. He spoke about the crisis that we're experiencing with the supply chain issues. I think that what it suggests is that we need to put a dent on the food that we import here in the territory and do a much better job. We import like 98% of the foods, and if we could reduce that number to 70%, I think it would put the Virgin Islands in a much more secure position. Senator, thank you so much for doing this with me tonight.

3:14:15 You're welcome. The time is up. Thank you very much. You're welcome. Coming up, of course, we have Winston. Thank you very much, Senator Potter, and of course, Africa, I wanted to tell you something very much. It's Senator Potter's brother, former Senator Hasbert Potter, and I went to the College of the Virgin Islands. Surprisingly, when I'm listening to now Senator Potter, I'm hearing then Senator Potter Their voices are the same Absolutely Who do you have coming up next?

3:14:58 I have coming up the chairman of the finance committee St. Croix Senator Kurt Ville Yes Welcome Senator Kurt Ville although i know five minutes is a short time for a man in the senate that we describe as the numbers cruncher um senator curvilay i have one question to ask you but before i ask you what is your general impression of the governor's speech tonight good evening uh winston and welcome back so i'm glad you're here i'm doing this interview tonight my impression was that he gave us a federal report he gave us a report of the utilization of covid funds the utilization of the american rescue plan um disaster recovery but it didn't touch a lot in terms on the the use or the development of additional funding that will go towards the gvi it was a lot of federal discussion so would you um i guess in our sense of a purpose in our uh way we speak you would said there was not a fleck a lot of flesh it was a pure uh federal discussion there were some specific areas that i was looking for that that was absent um after discussion there was no discussion of mental health there was no discussion of homelessness the discussion in reference to education was very vague um we were going to build a school for 242 million there was was no discussion of of the learning gap there was no before you go into that because I quote you you you said something in the daily news I think today where you said education and affordable housing is your kind of one of your concern and I quote you you said you like to hear how the Department

3:16:56 of Education will address the learning gap what do you mean by that specifically we have lost quite a number of students if you go through the various neighbourhood, especially the high schoolers, a number of students have dropped out of school and we're going to need to develop a retention plan where we're going to have to go back and capture those individuals and bring them back to school. If you realize the numbers that was spoken today in the governor's speech, he said we had 700 and something graduates territorially. We had 700 graduates within Charlotte and Mali and Complex five years ago. So there's a severe decrease in the number of students that are graduating from school and you must look at the impact and what is going on you got to look at the cohort so i think we need a way deeper discussion as to what is actually happening in the virgin islands when four high schools are graduating less than 200 students for school i see did you um hear any grass root um concerns that that you have in your mind that he didn't mention well even before you go there you said housing and i wanted to just touch on that quickly no problem senator the first time Home Buyers Act was a bill that I sponsored and a question that we asked the Housing Finance Authority Mr. Griffith about two weeks ago in which was told to us that they haven't even requested the four million dollars from the GVA yet to begin to make sure that this program is implemented so I heard a lot but I want implementation I want to see the invasion program I want to see that first time Home Buyers Act I want to see GFL not open I want to see actual stuff that we're able to see and touch because you're hearing well we have obligated four billion dollars but tomorrow when you drive on st croix can you see where the four billion dollars has been obligated or what have been spent in reference to infrastructure or in reference to programs a look at the healthcare system what have been touched for healthcare kimberman center is closed there's still no decision on snyder one louis not gfl not can't open what has been touched in education no no schools are being built

the newest school is going to start in 2023 what has been touching the infrastructure the major highway the major roads light and you're hearing a lot of we project by this date we project by that date we're going to get this done but what has actually been done now and what is the plan moving forward so my opening question was correct there were no flesh on the bone in my estimation barely

3:19:27 I see. What about, did you hear anything concerning the racetrack? I heard a discussion in reference to VIGL, we're going to do it with or without them. And then there was a discussion that an agreement will be sent down tomorrow, a bill will be sent down in reference to Southland Gaming and extending Southland Gaming contract for 12 years. So if that doesn't sound like special interest legislation, then I don't know what it is. but if you're extending a contract for 12 years to a company that has a monopoly on St Thomas and you're trying to say that other legislation has special interests you need to look at what you're submitting tomorrow okay we have 30 seconds what do you plan to do um going down the road well I wanted to end by saying the success financially of the government of the Virgin Islands lies in the legislature the finance committee being frugal for the last six years making sure that we cut the fat not over projecting and make sure that we have a balanced budget and an annual basis and the work of the 31st 32nd 32rd and now the 34th need to be looked at the tough measures that were passed to raise monies need to be looked at well senator kurt billing i want to thank you very much and of course always articulate and i appreciate your effort and thank you so much and thanks for the work that you're doing yes sir thank you very much and of Of course, I have Senator Saro, I want to welcome you. I have a quotation that you mentioned, but before I go into that, just give me your general opinion or your general view of the governor's speech tonight.

3:21:14 I mean, COVID has touched almost every agency, but let's look at the Department of Health, for example, the Department of Health, they're the lead on the COVID task force, but everything cannot be COVID. And a lot of it was based on the pandemic. Department of Health is responsible for mental health, for substance abuse, for family planning. And the same with IRB, the success of IRB cannot be predicated solely on how many stimulus checks was given out. how are we fixing the 6,000 tax errors that we have, you know? So a lot of it was focused on the pandemic, but agencies have a lot more that they're mandated to do by statute. And we've seemed to forgotten that.

3:21:59 Oh, I see. That's very interesting that you make that observation. I have a quotation from you that I read out of the Daily News. And the quotation that when I was reading it sounded like poetry to me. you said we are in a state of emergency but there is no urgency in moving the projects forward what what projects are you talking about um we have we have literally we're just announcing that we've been obligated money here obligated money there well we're not seeing the tangibles we're not able to touch the projects and when you look at the entire speech tonight it was again predicated or contingent upon all of these projects moving to 25 million that he intends to give back well he wants us in the budget to give back every year for retroactive that would come if if that is to be a reality we have to kickstart our economy our economy is a false economy right now because of the massive influx in federal dollars when that has ended how have we rebuilt our infrastructure to remain sustainable and to be competitive within the region you know look at tourism we talk about all these accolades of tourism and you know the growing number of overnight passengers but we have yet to finish our airport upgrades our vendors plaza is our problem uh we have the the four billion the four million dollars for um that that well actually was like 10.6 million for fisherman aid and about 650 000 was allocated for underwater sculptures that has not been done in there at the four-year mark so the the economy looks good based on the massive influx of the 8 billion in the federal funds plus the pandemic funds but we cannot measure our success like that what are we doing um for for to just rebuild the infrastructure and there's a state of emergency and we he comes every two or three months asking for an extension that means that the procurement processes should be expedited a good observation in in that context as usual you you are very researched yes and of course i like your projection in terms of that factor so senator sorrow i wish

3:24:15 you the best for the rest of the uh going down towards re-election and of course i'm looking forward to hear you back on the floor thank you so much yes have a good evening and thank you very much thank you yes and of course africa is back thank you for that wonderful interview i guess i think that tonight was really fruitful in terms of getting the senator's reactions to the governor's speech he definitely spoke about the gers pension system we spoke about agriculture one of the things that some of them were saying that the governor did not talk about what were some of the things that you learned well of course i i asked my question based upon you know i take a quick um read of the governor uh presentation because i finally get in the last minute a copy so i scanned it very much and i figured what i wanted to hear from them in terms of what they've been saying even before and what i think they were looking for you can't give away all our secrets well it's not a secret well i could give it a secret so nobody gonna do me anything now but i want to tell you it was my pleasure speaking with you again and of course working with you pleasure to work with you again thank you for coming out of retirement to join me tonight that's no problem and of course i am winston nugent and i'm africa harrigan thank And I wish the people a very good night.

3 : 26 : 10 We'll be right back. We'll see you next time.

People named in this transcript

SUSPECTED, and a finding aid only. Names were matched by machine against the spellings used across all 426 of our transcripts, and the title is the one used in the room. Being named here is NOT evidence that a person attended or spoke - only that the name was said. Speech recognition mishears names, so a spelling may be wrong even where no alternative is offered.

- 9x **Senator Milton E. Potter**
heard in this transcript as: Hasbert Potter, Potter
- 7x **Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach**
heard in this transcript as: Roach, Tregenza Rooch, Trigenza Roach
- 3x **Senator Marvin Blyden**
heard in this transcript as: Blyden
- 3x **Senator Novelle Francis**
heard in this transcript as: Francis
- 2x **Senator Carla Joseph**
the surname alone also matches: Clifford Joseph; Karla J. Joseph
heard in this transcript as: Joseph
- 2x **Commissioner Derrick Gabriel**
heard in this transcript as: Gabriel
- 2x **Senator Franklin D. Johnson**
heard in this transcript as: Johnson
- 2x **Senator Genevieve R. Whitaker**
heard in this transcript as: Whitaker
- 2x **Senator Janelle K. Saro**
heard in this transcript as: Saro
- 2x **Governor Juan F. Louis Hospital**
- 2x **Senator Kurt Violet**
heard in this transcript as: Kurt Ville
- 2x **Commissioner Ray Martinez**
- 2x **Senator Samuel Carrion**
heard in this transcript as: Carrion
- 2x **Senator Steven D. Payne Sr.**
heard in this transcript as: Payne, Steven D. Payne Sr
- 2x **Governor Wang F. Louis Hospital**
heard in this transcript as: Wann F. Louis Hospital
- 1x **Senator Athneil 'Bobby' Thomas**
heard in this transcript as: Anthony Thomas