



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE RECEIVES UPDATES

ST. CROIX—On Tuesday, Chairman Kenneth L. Gittens and members of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, received updates in the Frits E. Lawaetz Legislative Conference Room on the territory’s economic status from the Virgin Islands Economic Development Authority (VIEDA), Bureau of Economic Research (BER), and the Department of Tourism (DOT).

Wayne Biggs, Chief Executive Officer of the VIEDA, gave a status report on the Authority’s accomplishments and activities for Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021. The Authority implemented a voluntary telecommuting platform to remain accessible to the public, small businesses and stakeholders by conducting webinars, client-specific outreach activities and several surveys to provide assistance during the pandemic.

This fiscal year, the VIEDA plans to utilize existing economic development tools and marketing strategies to encourage high-net worth companies and individuals within the pharmaceutical, manufacturing, hospitality and financial service industries, as well as providing technical and financial resources to the small business community.

Commissioner Joseph Boschulte of the DOT testified virtually on their efforts to improve the local tourism industry. The USVI Travel Screening Portal, a crisis communications initiative, “Ensures the safety of the Territory’s residents, as well as that of incoming visitors, by eliminating or limiting the inflow of COVID-19-positive travelers,” said Boschulte. The portal is supported by a 24-hour, in-house customer service center, handling inquiries and concerns from passengers via phone or email. Managed by Marketplace Excellence, the public relations agency has processed over 168,000 travelers to date.

The Department’s plans also include overhauling its Tourism Ambassadors’ website to further connect Virgin Islanders at home and abroad. Digital campaigns and platforms including Pandora, Refinery29 and Condé Nast Traveler have been instrumental during the pandemic, “To keep prospective visitors engaged with the destination, while simultaneously educating the public about COVID-19 and the importance of complying with public health protocols,” said the Commissioner.

Donnie Dorsett, Senior Policy Analyst at the Bureau of Economic Research, presented historical and statistical data on the territory’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the Tourism and Employment sectors. “Historically, Tourism and the export of refined petroleum products contributed largely to the Territory’s GDP,” said Dorsett.

Approximately 51% of businesses were strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, 8% of small businesses may be at risk of closing permanently in 3-5 months, and 18% are at risk of closure in the next 6-12 months. The pandemic continues to impact the local travel and transportation, hotels, restaurants, retail, and tourist attractions. The Unemployment Rate has

begun an uptick in both districts,” Dorsett added. In the first quarter of Fiscal year 2021, the average unemployment rate in the territory is 9%, with the following rate in each district:

- St. Thomas/St. John- 10.0%
- St. Croix- 7.9%

“We’ve had a very wholesome and productive dialogue as we all to do our part to continue driving our economy,” said Chairman Gittens. “This pandemic has created a number of opportunities for us as a territory to continue to thrive and diversify our product,” he concluded.

Committee members present during Tuesday’s hearing: Chairman Kenneth Gittens, Vice-Chair Milton Potter, Senators Dwayne DeGraff, Novelle Francis Jr., Donna Frett-Gregory, Javan James Sr., and Alma Francis Heyliger. Non-committee members present during the hearing: Senators Franklin Johnson, Genevieve Whitaker, Kurt Vialet and Samuel Carrion.

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