



FORMATIVE ISSUES

Final Draft

The Comp Plan process has reached an important stage where the insights from research, interviews, and public engagement from the Town Hall meetings in February and March and the first online public survey can be organized into a series of formative issues that will serve to frame the plan. These formative issues have been reviewed and edited based on initial feedback from the Working Groups on St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix and an online public survey.

Thank you to everyone who has provided feedback to date on the draft Formative Issues.

The text below will directly inform the content of the comp plan and serve as a backdrop for the plan's policies and strategies.

DRAFT

Formative Issues

There are 10 Formative Issues provided below. These are not presented in any order of priority.

Governing Effectively

The Government of the USVI should first and foremost prioritize the concerns, welfare, well-being, environment, safety, and security of the people of the Virgin Islands. The vision set forth by the Comp Plan cannot be achieved or maintained without a territorial government that has the legal foundation, the capacity, and the will to do so. Government Divisions and Departments will need the staff, equipment, technology, funding, and expertise to execute solutions that may require many years to complete and are complex and large in scope. Infrastructure, utilities, regulations, and other public services pose challenges that change from one island to another. Effective delivery must account for these challenges. Decisions relating to the regulation of land and water areas should be informed by policies that consider the best available data. The knowledge of experts and the experience of residents are valuable for setting an agenda for how we use our land and water. In addition, it is important to take advantage of the skills and resources of partners such as quasi-governmental agencies and non-profit organizations to get this work done. Decisions regarding the use of land and water must also include answering the questions, “Who benefits, who does not, and who might be harmed?” Policies and actions must be intentional and equitable and target the needs of vulnerable groups and those who have experienced harm over generations from past poor practices. Decision making, especially around zoning and coastal management, must also be transparent and more open to the public, inclusive of voices not historically considered in setting land and water use policy. There should also be better structures for these decisions to be made at the local level on each island. Further, there must be checks and balances to ensure that decision makers are held accountable for following and enforcing laws and policies.

Celebrating Our History and Culture

The history and culture of the US Virgin Islands can be experienced in the landscapes, art, and historic neighborhoods across the islands. The archaeological sites of indigenous people, the architecture of historic buildings, museums and cultural centers, and sites that carry rich oral histories all contribute to the heritage woven into everyday experience. Equally important is maintaining space for and supporting cultural events and performances and fostering new cultural opportunities into the future. Restoring, preserving, and cultivating awareness and use of these resources should be a primary land and water use focus for the USVI. This will contribute fundamentally to the ongoing economic success and cultural appreciation for generations to come.

Providing Homes for Everyone

The USVI is experiencing a housing crisis in which the typical price of a home, whether for renters or buyers, is not affordable when compared with the typical incomes and wages of the majority of residents. This mismatch between what people earn and what housing costs is a common story across the U.S., but it is particularly severe in the USVI. The need for more affordable housing options and housing types that better meet the needs of Virgin Islanders of all ages and incomes, such as lower income residents, middle-income residents, young adults, families, and seniors, has reached levels that are stressing communities and the islands’ economy. In addition to the need for housing, how it is constructed and where it is built is becoming increasingly important in the face of recent hurricanes and climate change as well as the need for more walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods that can reduce dependence on

automobiles. Finally, many existing homes in the USVI are in disrepair and there is a tremendous need to help families reinvest in these properties to serve as homes for generations to come.

Connecting People, Commerce, and Places

The roadway and marine transport systems in the USVI are inefficient and strained. The design of many streets does not safely accommodate people who want to walk or ride bicycles and can add to environmental issues caused by water runoff. Ongoing roadway maintenance is a challenge. Public transportation is often not a reliable or attractive option and there is a strong need for more affordable and convenient alternatives to driving private vehicles and traveling between the islands of the Territory. Consequently, there is an unsustainable over-reliance on automobiles to move people and on trucks to move consumer goods and freight and often a shortage of parking to accommodate all these vehicles. Areas that experience large influxes of tourists often are not designed to effectively move visitors to shops, restaurants, and attractions in an effective manner. Freight movement can also be concentrated on individual ports, relying too heavily on trucks to distribute goods across roadway systems poorly designed to handle this type of traffic, including through residential neighborhoods where they can be a nuisance. Policies should recognize the connection between land/marine use and transportation systems and the need to support more diverse mobility options for people and more efficient delivery of goods and services throughout the Territory. There are also direct links between the availability of walking and biking infrastructure and improved public health through more active lifestyles.

Protecting Natural Resources

The USVI's natural resources are central to cultural identity, public health, ecological systems, and economic well-being. Forests, water resources, coastal areas, floodplains, wetlands, and marine habitats are part of larger ecosystems connected by water and natural processes that are vulnerable to impacts from development. Environmental degradation inherently impacts our wellbeing and affects the ability of natural resources to provide important hazard mitigation benefits, such as cooling and storm protection. These losses affect the USVI's overall resiliency to climate change and the quality of reefs and fish stocks. Maintaining natural resources is also a major contributor to the economy through tourism. Land and water use policies should focus on conserving and restoring our most sensitive resources, considering the cumulative impacts of both existing and new development and water uses. Where development or water use is appropriate, policies should focus on reducing, managing, and mitigating impacts through the most current and future best practices and enforcement. Steps can also be taken to apply these best practices to existing development and waters to lessen their impact.

Improving and Maintaining Quality of Life

Quality of life is directly tied to the way in which we use and restore our land and water. Places dedicated to education, art, health care, recreation, gathering, and passive enjoyment of nature, both on land and water, create a sense of community and provide essential services and health benefits to residents and visitors. A wide array of agencies and organizations are tasked with setting and enforcing policies, and establishing, operating, and maintaining these community spaces and institutions, with particular needs for seniors, veterans, and youth. Land and water use policies should establish sustainable funding sources, foster opportunities for collaboration, control for potential nuisances such as noise and odors, manage conflicting uses, and build a system of amenities that fosters civic responsibility, public health, opportunities for physical activity, and community pride.

Mitigating the Impacts of Climate Change

As a community of islands, the USVI is experiencing many of the effects of climate change more dramatically than most other areas of the U.S. and is also dealing with sea level rise. Situated in the path of severe storms and potentially debilitating hurricanes and tsunamis, residents and business owners are vulnerable to extended periods without power, basic services, food, water, communications, and transportation. Beyond storms, rising seas, and erosion, increased ocean temperatures and extended droughts will impact important natural resources and water supply. This will change the environments that enable coral, mangroves, coastal wetlands, and other important natural areas to thrive. Policies for land and water use should carefully consider the safety issues associated with developing in areas where storm related risks are elevated. New policies should encourage adaptations to prepare for drought. They must also consider the long-term impacts of warming oceans and what measures can be taken to foster the resilience of sensitive coastal and marine resources, mitigate shoreline loss, and protect bays and harbors both environmentally and for human use.

Economic Opportunity & Resilience

Economic policies should create more economic opportunities that empower residents and improve quality of life. Creating a clear policy and regulatory framework for land and water use is fundamental to a dynamic business environment and economic prosperity. This framework will need to acknowledge issues that are common across the Territory, as well as the different assets and opportunities on the three major islands. Understanding these different opportunities can help prepare sites for development. We can target sustainable growth in different sectors like marine industries, agriculture/ agribusiness, specialized manufacturing, and tech-based industry. This strategy will lead to economic diversification, which is essential for the local economy to withstand unexpected market changes and natural hazards. This is critical since the current economy is highly dependent on tourism. While tourism will likely remain a centerpiece of the USVI economy, supporting the evolution of the tourism economy to be more environmentally sound and align with local priorities will be important to maintain the positive economic contribution of visitors to the Territory. The Comp Plan should promote land use patterns and water use regulations that are conducive to the USVI's target industries and encourage long-term solutions that strengthen infrastructure around the Territory, including the use of nature-based infrastructure. The issue of equitable tax policy reform is also critical, particularly related to property tax and inheritance tax. Economic development initiatives should be relevant to the cultural and place-based context of each of the major islands, sensitive to the carrying capacities of infrastructure and natural resources, and supportive of corporate social responsibility.

Sustainability and Stewardship

As a collection of island communities, the USVI faces unique challenges related to delivering many basic needs in a sustainable manner. Drinking water, waste management, food supply, and electric power are examples of essential everyday needs that are more difficult to deliver and manage around the islands. The challenges associated with these basic needs also create opportunities for other sustainable approaches like composting, renewable energy, more complete local food production, and more innovative water production, collection, treatment, distribution, and storage practices. Each of these approaches has land use considerations, and policies should be designed to foster opportunity for different sustainable strategies.

Development, Redevelopment, Restoration, and Conservation

Basically, the Comp Plan should establish a broad vision of where development should occur and where it should not occur and how coastal areas and marine waters should be used. Further, where development or water use is anticipated, the plan should provide guidance on the uses, scale, and character of that development or water use. Human use of water resources is a particularly significant part of people's lives in the USVI and hugely culturally important. Shipping, live-aboards, recreational boating, diving, snorkeling, fishing (whether for sustenance, recreation, or commerce), and swimming and wading are all integral to the quality of life here. Conflicting resource usage among residents, tourism, industry, commerce, and conservation such as boat moorings, boat waste, anchors, protecting harbors, managing sunscreen, illegal harvesting, overfishing etc., are just some examples of the competing interests that must be balanced. In many ways, this formative issue encompasses many, if not all, of the others and serves as a reminder of the overarching framework provided by the plan. It should demonstrate and support the interconnectedness of economic, environmental, and social needs of the Territory. It should show how land and water use policies can address multiple challenges. Ultimately, the plan will create a framework to identify the types of development zones required for land and water, where land and water should be conserved or used for parks, recreation, and boating, and how the boundaries of zones or the uses within them can be changed over time. To the greatest extent possible, development in the USVI should help restore and sustain our land and water rather than degrade them. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the Territory is impacted by land and water use decisions outside its jurisdiction. Continued communications with neighbors, such as the British Virgin Islands, will be critical to ensuring the flow of people and goods among the islands is a net positive for the USVI's economy and environment.