

USVI Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan

St. Thomas Working Group Meeting – June 30, 2023 – 12 pm

The virtual meeting of the St. Thomas Working Group for the USVI Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan (CLWUP) was held via Zoom on Friday, 6/30/23 from 12:00 – 1:00 pm AST.

Present

Katina Coulianos, Mary Ann LaFleur, Laura Martin, Noreen Michael, Gwen-Marie Moolenaar, Meg Novacek, Miguel Quinones, Lauren Ruan, Langley Shazor, Karen Williams, Jeff Davis (HW), Krista Moravec (HW), Kellie King (HW), and Leia LaPlace (DPNR)

Welcome

Meg Novacek expressed a concern about the difference between the Working Group’s demographics and that of the USVI at large. **Jeff Davis (HW)** acknowledged this challenge and noted similar conversations have occurred with the STX and STJ Working Groups. He reiterated that HW/project team is working identify strategies to increase public engagement to ensure the process engages diverse individuals that are representative of the USVI’s demographics. HW/project team continues to appreciate any suggestions on who/what organizations could be contacted as part of the plan process.

Jeff Davis (HW) and **Leia LaPlace (DPNR)** provided brief opening remarks.

Introductions

All individuals who were unable to attend the kickoff meeting introduced themselves (name, residence, association).

Shorthand for the Comprehensive Land & Water Use Plan

Jeff Davis (HW) shared that based on feedback received so far, the plan branding will be adjusted. Officially, the plan still is the “Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan” (or “CLWUP”) but will move forward as the “Comprehensive Plan” (or “Comp Plan”). Jeff noted this will be easier to refer to and hopefully easier for people to understand. Communications and promotional materials will reflect this change moving forward.

Formative Issues, Policy Directions & Working Strategies

Jeff Davis (HW) provided an overview of the responses from the Formative Issues public survey. There were approximately 30 responses. Though limited, the responses included many substantive comments. The vast majority of responses expressed support for the proposed Formative Issues as-is or with modifications. Less than 2% of responses were not in support of the proposed Formative Issues. The most common request from the responses was to make water uses more prominent. Jeff also noted that, based on voluntary demographics information, respondents skewed older (≥ 50 years old) and female. Around 40% of respondents self-identified as a person of color.

Jeff Davis (HW) provided a summary of feedback received from the Working Groups:

- There was a strong recommendation to focus on *people*, and frame issues from the perspectives of how people, culture, and heritage are impacted.

- There was a strong emphasis on government transparency, accountability, and staff capacity, including concerns about how to increase accountability and improve staff capacity to ensure the Comp Plan is appropriately implemented.
- Many comments emphasized more opportunities for local decision making, particularly on STJ.
- Specific environmental concerns were raised across several topics, including regeneration, sustainability, conservation, and sustainable development.
- Similar to the public feedback, Working Group members' feedback reiterated the recommendation to place a greater emphasis on water uses.

Jeff Davis (HW) provided an overview of potential guidelines for government decision making and implementation (sent via email prior to Working Group meeting). Jeff noted that these are common themes HW sees in other communities.

Guidelines for How We Make Change are below:

- **Set Goals:** Be clear about what the government is trying to accomplish.
- **Collect Data:** Follow up with data collection to track progress and success toward meeting established goals.
- **Be Accountable:** Hold government agencies and officials accountable for their actions. Determining what mechanisms exist or should be created to ensure accountability.
- **Act Equitably:** Apply an equity lens to all work. This can involve asking, "who is benefitting, who is not, and is this action going to provide equitable opportunities for everyone?"
- **Mind the Future:** Consider climate change and make decisions that account for climate trends.
- **Embrace Change:** Act from a mindset that it is okay to try new approaches and solutions.

Jeff Davis (HW) provided an overview of the draft Policy Directions and Working Strategies document. Written comments will be accepted through July 5 to allow the project team enough time to incorporate this information into the boards before the town halls. Jeff emphasized that the working strategies are *example types of strategies that could end up in the plan and are not intended to be a comprehensive list*. Jeff expressed that the STX and STJ Working Groups said that these documents were good but have a lot of information and it may be better to scale back some of the content to ensure materials are not overwhelming when they get brought to the public. Jeff noted that HW/project team is thinking of how to tighten the policy directions and highlight 1-2 strategies for purposes of making things more accessible and digestible to the general public.

Discussion

Regarding the Guidelines for How We Make Change

Mary Ann LaFleur expressed interest in the guidelines but voiced concerns about the administrative details, particularly around accountability. Mary Ann said that it is important to know who is monitoring data and progress to ensure people are on target and wanted to know what consequences are implementable as part of these guidelines. She asked what sort of implementation and monitoring actions could be used to ensure milestones are reached.

- **Jeff Davis (HW)** acknowledged that concerns about accountability have been raised by the public and other Working Groups. Jeff said that HW often sees communities transitioning a plan working group to an "implementation committee" role to help monitor progress and do periodic check-ins.

HW has seen a lot of success with this approach when citizen groups form the implementation committee. Jeff emphasized that HW/project team is considering what sort of long-term monitoring strategies might work for the USVI and acknowledged that this was critical for the plan's success.

- **Mary Ann LaFleur** said that she has seen strategic plans that end up on a shelf because there is no monitoring or follow-up built in and expressed that she does not want that to happen here.
- **Jeff Davis (HW)** agreed and said that part of the plan development will be building in a framework for implementation, so it does not just sit on the shelf.
- **Miguel Quinones** agreed with Mary Ann's point. Miguel noted that goals need to be dynamic on their own and be able to draw energy and get buy-in. It is also important that the goals can evolve over time to address the complexity of their topics. Part of long-term implementation and success will be considering what barriers have prevented successful plan-making or implementation in the past and shifting practices and changing mindsets accordingly.

Langley Shazor said that he thinks this is moving in the right direction and that he is excited to see how implementation works. From a policy perspective, data collection will be especially important and help transparency and accountability. Langley noted that in his professional experience, it has not always been clear how the data should drive policy, or what data should be collected. Answering those questions will help implementation and should be considered when developing the final goals.

Gwen Moolenaar was positive about the document but expressed concern about the implementation and sustainability of the whole project overall. Gwen said that she was concerned about how continuity is assured across administration changes. She asked if HW had recommendations on how the government decision-making guidelines could be codified or more embedded in government policies so effective decision-making and implementation can proceed irrespective of the administration in charge.

- **Jeff Davis (HW)** emphasized that this is a perennial issue in every community, and it takes foresight and political leadership to address. At the municipal and state level, HW often encourages communities to adopt the implementation framework into their code of ordinances, so it has legal weight that transcends administrations. The matter of ensuring continuity is something that HW/project team has been considering since plan development started: HW is discussing with DPNR and Commissioner Oriol the best way to legally situate the Comprehensive Plan to ensure it has staying power.

Sandro Romano echoed previous comments, reiterating that these documents have the basis to be a great plan and the decision-making principles were refreshing to see. Sandra noted that the challenge is making sure these principles are truly integrated into government policy. The suggestion to use an implementation committee of citizens to monitor progress is interesting, but she has not seen that work that well in the USVI. Any other ideas from HW/project team and other Working Group members would be welcome. This sounds aspirational, but she hopes that we can get there.

- **Jeff Davis (HW)** acknowledged the challenges of successfully getting the Comprehensive Plan adopted and implemented. Jeff reiterated that challenge is one of the reasons we wanted Working Groups—to better understand how the islands/USVI work, what your experiences are, and how to communicate most effectively with people, political decision-makers, government agencies, etc.

Regarding the draft Policy Directions and Working Strategies

Miguel Quinones noted that he has 10 years of experience working with DPNR. Regarding DPNR's role for implementation, Miguel recommended setting a timeframe to tighten these documents and identify roles within the organization that are necessary. Miguel was interested in moving forward with all the associated policy/process changes that may come out of the Comprehensive Plan and identifying the barriers that may prevent implementation (e.g., funding, staff, knowledge). He also noted the importance of promoting continuous education opportunities for agency staff to make sure they can keep up with needs and changes.

Mary Ann LaFleur asked how Working Group members should provide feedback.

- **Jeff Davis (HW)** said that HW will take comments in whatever form works best via email. Working Group members can identify specific pages/paragraphs and note feedback or track changes within the Word document. If doing a Word document, Working Group members should change the document name ending to “_YourName/Initials” so HW can track documents more efficiently.

Mary Ann LaFleur liked the emphasis on best practices and equity in the draft formative issues.

Lauren Ruan emphasized the need to include agencies and actors that understand funding and financing in the Comprehensive Plan process, because DPNR will not be the only government agency responsible for implementation. Lauren also expressed that youth need to be involved in the process.

- **Jeff Davis (HW)** observed that the STX and STJ Working Groups had similar conversations about how to market and “sell” the Comprehensive Plan so everyone sees it as a positive thing that agencies and the public can work together on.
- **Mary Ann LaFleur** asked about how the public bidding process works and how construction guidelines are used for government projects.
- **Lauren Ruan** responded that accountability can be an issue, as can following construction guidelines appropriately, leading to more public money being spent to resolve issues.
- **Meg Novacek** suggested reframing some of these issues from the perspective of “risk mitigation.” How can the USVI mitigate the risks around accountability and following best practices? Meg proposed that the approach should be to make it easier for people to comply with requirements and follow best practices.
- **Gwen Moolenaar** supported Meg Novacek's recommendation, and expressed that the Comprehensive Plan should include a section on risks that must be mitigated, particularly in reference to the plan's implementation.

Town Hall Meetings & Open Houses – July 18-20

Krista Moravec (HW) provided an overview of the expected structure and logistics for the upcoming July in-person events. The primary goal of the town hall events is to gather feedback on the draft policy directions and working strategies.

The expected logistics are as follows:

- St. Thomas Town Hall Meeting: July 18th, 5:30 – 7:30 pm, location TBD.
 - Short presentation to review what has happened so far with the Comprehensive Plan and provide an overview of the draft policy directions and working strategies.

- After the presentation, people circulate freely around 10 stations. Each station covers one policy direction and will be staffed by a member of the project team. Staff will be available for informal conversations and to record feedback.
- The public can provide feedback via a hard copy worksheet and/or online survey.
- Note: an Open House will immediately precede the Town Hall Meeting from 4:30 – 5:30 pm (same location). People can review the 10 stations, talk with staff, and provide feedback in a more informal setting.

Krista Moravec (HW) noted that a “virtual Open House” with the same materials will be live on the project website (www.planUSVI.com) from July 18th – August 6th to allow for the public to continue to submit feedback and ideas. Hard copy worksheet materials will also be made available at DPNR’s offices. Krista noted that all forms of feedback will ask participants to provide voluntary demographics information.

Other Outreach Opportunities, Marketing & Communications

Krista Moravec (HW) said that HW/project team will also be on St. Thomas on July 17th and would appreciate other ideas for who they should talk to or what they could do that day for public engagement. Ideas for public engagement more broadly are also appreciated.

Discussion

Meg Novacek recommended doing informal interviews on the street to catch people who might not be engaged by the Town Hall Meeting or virtual Open House.

- **Krista Moravec (HW)** agreed with that idea, noting that HW/project team is planning for a similar approach on STJ based on the STJ Working Group’s idea.
- **Jeff Davis (HW)** reported that the STJ Working Group volunteered to find STJ locals to pair up with HW/project team and go to different locations to meet and talk with people.

Karen Williams wrote in the Zoom chat that she sent an email about doing public outreach at Tap & Still’s locations prior to the meeting.

Meg Novacek wrote in the Zoom chat that 1-2 quick questions for informal interviews on the street could be efficient and focused on what people like about the USVI and what could be improved.

Sandra Romano observed that the previous online survey was taken mostly by older and retired individuals who are more likely to be financially secure, which is not representative of the USVI overall. Sandra asked about visiting youth summer camps/programs and the Department of Labor offices.

Krista Moravec (HW) noted that HW/project team can create materials and help folks get organized for additional outreach.

Sandra Romano wrote in the Zoom chat that engaging UVI’s student groups could also help with getting more diverse responses and spreading the word.

Meg Novacek suggested in the Zoom chat that laundromats may also be a good place to reach people.

Lauren Ruan asked if HW/project team is reaching out to the Latino and French communities.

- **Krista Moravec (HW)** said that additional contacts would be helpful if the Working Group members can provide any ideas.

- **Miguel Quinones** asked if the final report will be translated into other languages.
- **Jeff Davis (HW)** said that the project budget does not encompass translation of the entire document, and the project team is trying to assess what materials would be best to translate into different languages to be most effective. Any guidance on what would be most helpful to get translated is appreciated.

Jeff Davis (HW) reiterated that any specific ideas on groups that HW/project team should meet with while everyone is on-island is helpful.

Langley Shazor suggested the UVI Innovation Center, as they offer various youth, young adults, and adult programs and may also have ideas about other outreach methods and contacts.

Miguel Quinones recommended using social media and piggybacking off active existing groups. Miguel recommended doing social media posts for each of the guiding principles.

- **Jeff Davis (HW)** agreed and said that DPNR has been pushing out news on their Facebook page, but that the HW/project team is looking for other ideas of where to post.
- **Meg Novacek** suggested in the Zoom chat to consider a thread on WGOST or another youth-oriented group.
- **Karen Williams** said in chat that Gun Violence Prevention is very active and has regular activities aimed at teens and young adults. Karen said she would provide contact information via email to HW.

Sandra Romano proposed asking some UVI students to join the Working Groups. Students may be more helpful for some of the social media outreach.

Lauren Ruan wrote in the Zoom chat that the Junior Summer Sailing Program at the American Yacht Harbor and the Swim Association by the pool would be good contacts.

Miguel Quinones recommended working with DLCA, which has contacts for all registered professionals in development/development-adjacent professions (e.g., engineers, architects).

Gwen Molenaar recommended also contacting realtors and realtor groups.

- **Jeff Davis (HW)** agreed and asked Leia LaPlace (DPNR) to report on how DPNR's meeting on June 29th with a realtor group went.
- **Leia LaPlace (DPNR)** reported that it went well, and the realtor group will be included on all information updates from DPNR as part of their e-list.

Lauren Ruan recommended in the Zoom chat that VIFHA should also be included.

- **Jeff Davis (HW)** said that HW/project team has been trying to schedule a meeting with VIFHA and will continue to try and get that on the calendar.
- **Krista Moravec (HW)** reiterated that government agencies have been engaged as part of the Comprehensive Plan process already—HW/project team met with different agencies at the beginning to bring them up to speed and hear their concerns and will continue to keep an open dialogue with them.
- **Jeff Davis (HW)** said that DPNR is also leading an Agency Working Group, similar to the island-specific working groups to involve the USVI's agencies throughout the process.

Closing

Jeff Davis (HW) reiterated that all Working Group members will be sent the meeting materials and meeting minutes later this week. As a reminder, written comments on the draft Policy Directions and Working Strategies are due by July 5th via email.

Miquel Quinones noted that the word “use” in the plan’s official name felt extractive/exploitative, and asked the Working Group to reflect on that phrasing.

- **Jeff Davis (HW)** noted that regardless of the official name of the “Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan,” HW/project team’s approach has always been to consider environmental impacts and the role of the USVI’s government and residents in stewarding and protecting the land and they are committed to ensuring that comes through in the plan.