

COMMITTEE ON HOUSING,
TRANSPORTATION &
TELECOMMUNICATIONS

SENATOR MARVIN BLYDEN
CHAIRPERSON

BILL NO. 34-0087
COMPLETE STREETS &
TASK FORCE



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COMMISSIONER
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS
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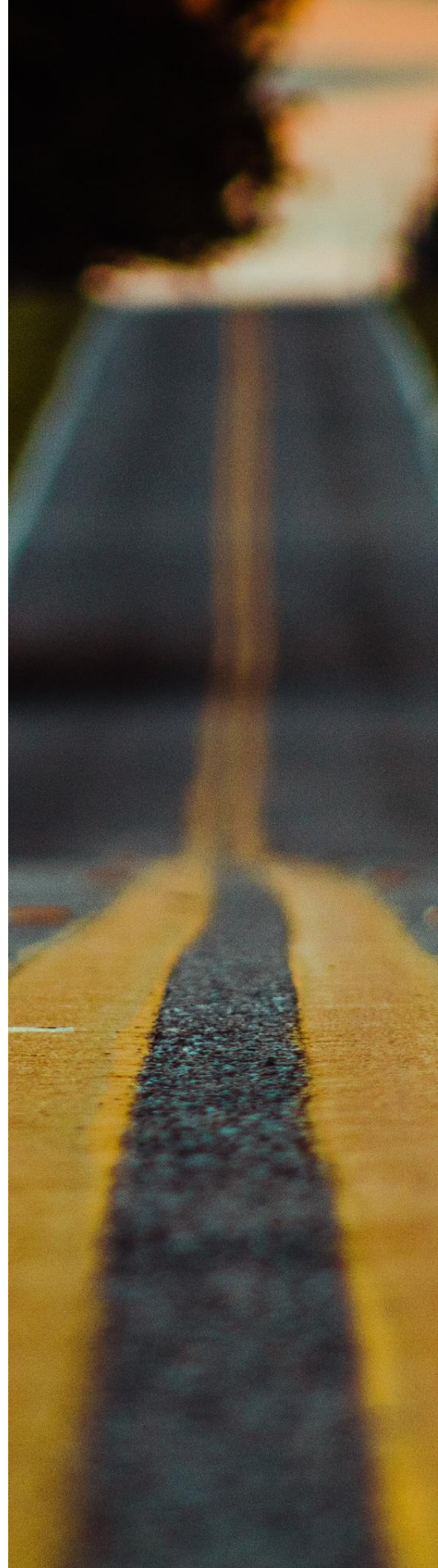
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INTRODUCTION

Good morning Senator Marvin Blyden, Chairperson of the Committee on Housing, Transportation & Telecommunications; Committee members; all other senators in attendance today; as well as those in the listening and viewing audience.

I am Derek Gabriel, Commissioner of the Department of Public Works. With me today is Mr. Jomo McClean, Program Manager and Mr. Piotr Gajewski, Project Manager, both from the Office of Highway Engineering. I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Bill 34-0087 – “An Act providing for a Complete Streets Policy and creating a Complete Streets Task Force within the Department of Public Works to aid in the development and implementation of strategies to increase the usability of all streets for all modes of travel for citizens of all ages and abilities in the Virgin Islands.”



We support the spirit and intent of this legislation, as it is one that provides aspirational models for our highways, streets, corridors and thoroughfares. The Department of Public Works, in conjunction with our federal highway partners, are already making strides within the department to bring several segments of this bill to fruition. However, there are a few sections that are concerning.

TASKFORCE

We believe our current design review process allows for most of the policies, standards and future needs being considered in this legislation. Right now, we have implemented a design review process where the Government's Territorial ADA Coordinator is involved at the appropriate design review intervals. The department also has trained architects, engineers and project managers that are reviewing these plans at the various stages to ensure all applicable laws, policies, rules and regulations are followed. Subsequently, the Department of Planning and Natural Resources reviews these project plans as part of the permitting process. Yes, the personnel involved in the review process are mostly technical, but they are also taking into consideration all aspects concerning walkability, alternative and future uses, as well as mitigation, resiliency, long term maintenance and sustainability.

It will be important to ensure the Task Force does not become an additional layer of bureaucracy, and instead functions as an advisory committee representing portions of our underserved population during the initial phases of the design review process. I also suggest reducing the Task Force to a seven-member body to allow for more flexibility and better chances of consistently establishing a quorum.

FUNDING

There was no funding allocated to cover the costs of this initiative in the proposed legislation. The section of the bill pertaining to annual reporting lists numerous measurable tasks that must be demonstrated and documented on a yearly basis to meet the annual reporting requirements. These tasks would require a designated employee, which of course

requires additional funding. Without providing an appropriate funding source, this bill is another unfunded mandate that the Department cannot sustain.

LAND USE

We have additional concerns regarding land use. There are several areas of our Territory, particularly our historic towns, districts and sights, where there is a high improbability of implementing Complete Streets in these areas. As islands, we have limitations due to our landscape and topography. For instance, if you build a road to our current federal standards, that's already 16 feet, at minimum, for two lanes of roadway. That does not include the additional two to four feet for drainage or five feet for sidewalks. Taking it a step further by adding bike lanes makes the width even larger. As residents of this Territory, we all understand how narrow many of our roads are, especially in the historic districts. In addition to the possible financial burden, it is a question if we would even have the space. In some instances, the land is unavailable to acquire, again, as is the case in our historic districts.

Needless to say, we will not be able to include all requirements stipulated in this bill on every road project. However, I do appreciate Section 55, subsection (d) allows for context sensitive design. I recommend this Body consider funding a program, spread over years, to bring our historic towns into compliance with current codes. This will take significant effort and coordination between many of the agencies mentioned in this proposed legislation. If funded and implemented properly, this legislation could be the conduit for such a program.

CURRENT PROJECTS

Two projects we would like to highlight are Mahogany Road on St. Croix and Donoe Bypass on St. Thomas. Both projects include pavement reconstruction, asphalt paving, new drainage crossings, paved waterways, striping and signage. The Donoe Bypass Project will include sidewalks, as well as bus stops, and the Mahogany Road Project will include bike lanes.

The department recently participated in a workshop spearheaded by the Office of Disaster Recovery, where we discussed comprehensively addressing communities throughout the Territory in conjunction with our disaster recovery partners such as the V.I. Housing Authority, V.I. Housing Finance Authority, Water and Power Authority, and Waste Management Authority, among others. We have a unique opportunity to comprehensively address several of the areas delineated in the proposed legislation through proper phasing and sequencing. I feel confident saying that soon, we will have a comprehensive community plan and, as a government, we are moving towards proper programming instead of addressing issues on a project-by-project basis. I believe if implemented and executed properly, this legislation can enhance our programming efforts to ensure all segments of our community have their needs addressed.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as I stated in the beginning of my testimony, I support the spirit of the bill. Based on the CDC recommendations of a Healthy Community Design Initiative, Complete Streets are streets designed and operated to enable safe use and support mobility for all users including people of all ages and abilities, regardless of whether they are traveling as drivers, pedestrians, bicyclists, or public transportation riders. "The concept of Complete Streets encompasses many approaches to planning, designing, and operating roadways and rights of way with all users in mind to make the transportation network safer and more efficient."

We do have examples of Complete Streets in St. Thomas, such as Veteran's Drive Phase 1, which provides a highway and a corridor that is walkable, accommodates bicycles, and has bus stops. It is located near to two underserved communities, Paul M. Pearson Gardens and Oswald Harris Court. In St. Croix, we have the Christiansted Bypass and on St. John we are currently discussing comprehensively rehabilitating Centerline Road.

Again, thank you for allowing me to provide testimony on Bill No. 34-0087. My team and I stand ready to answer any questions.