



Virgin Islands Association Takes on Historic Preservation/Renovation With Issues Mobilization Grant

The price of living in paradise is occasional rough weather – and when storms the like of Hurricanes Hugo [1989] and Marilyn [1995] battered the U.S. Virgin Islands, the damage to property proved too much for owners of many of the islands’ historic homes, some of which date back to the 18th century.

Over the years, the resulting abandonment of these properties has caused a blight that affects the quality of life, economic vitality, and property values of the once lovely historic rings of houses that distinguish the islands’ downtown areas. And then there’s the matter of the million-odd dollars in back-taxes owed...

Belton Jennings, RCE CAE CIPS, executive officer of the 292-member Virgin Islands Territorial Association of REALTORS® [VITAR], along with Legislative Chair April Newland and VITAR President Kerstin McConnell, led a campaign to get legislation passed that will not only preserve these endangered properties, but rehabilitate them to their highest and best use. *(See examples of these endangered properties on page 3)*

With start-to-finish mentoring provided by Chip Ahlsweide, a veteran Government Affairs consultant with the National Association of REALTORS®, VITAR applied for and received an Issues Mobilization grant of \$44,000 from NAR and then planned and executed its campaign strategy.

“We tried in 2011 to pass similar legislation, but lacked the necessary public support and the professional research data to pack the wallop we needed in the hearings,” explains Jennings. “NAR’s support allowed us to put together a very effective, sustained campaign, which we could not have done with our own resources. These were REALTOR® dues very well spent!” VITAR created a website and Facebook page to create public awareness, and then recruited other stakeholders and interested citizens to form the Community Alliance to Preserve Our Historic Neighborhoods.

The grant funded a comprehensive study by respected local architect and urban planner, Dr. Wanda Mills-Bocachica, who, with the help of students from the University of the Virgin Islands, compiled the first-ever in-depth survey of historic structures within the islands’ three National Historic Districts. They used this information to create a massive database, to which they added all available public records data, including ownership and tax records. More than 400 historic buildings were determined to be in “fair to poor” condition – the point at which the damage becomes difficult to reverse.

The research phase also included an NAR-funded public opinion poll, which showed overwhelming support for preservation by Virgin Islanders. There is significant concern about the deteriorating buildings for reasons ranging from public safety and health to their harboring criminals, drug dealers and squatters. These same quality of life issues for island residents naturally have an adverse effect on the islands’ tourist industry, too -- the main engine of the territory’s economy. “Places like Curacao and Martinique have done a great job revitalizing and refreshing their historic port areas, which makes them very attractive to cruise ships,” notes Jennings, “They’re showing us what is possible – but they’re also threatening our market share if we let our islands become ‘stale’.”



The NAR grant also enabled VITAR to conduct a high-profile advertising and public relations campaign, incorporating the release of the survey results and photos of the dilapidated properties. REALTORS® Newland and McConnell made the rounds of every radio and TV talk show in the islands, plus generated news stories with walking tours and arranged interviews with residents affected by these blighted properties.

When the legislature's Planning & Environmental Protection Committee held its hearing on August 1st, the room was packed with concerned citizens, and a remarkable six hours of testimony was presented.

"We made it clear that if we don't act now, it's going to affect the local economy and our attractiveness to investors -- not to mention all those tax dollars not being collected. We knew we had to show broad-based community support this time around, and we did that in spades," laughs Jennings. "Clearly, the legislature had never seen such a well-organized campaign grow up around any issue. It got us their attention and respect. Essentially," he concludes, "there's a new 600-pound gorilla on the Virgin Islands political scene. We're the smallest of all the state associations, but we're feeling pretty mighty now."

The bill developed by VITAR and the Community Alliance to Preserve Our Historic Neighborhoods must still clear the legislature's powerful Rules Committee to be put to a vote on the floor of the legislature this fall, but Jennings believes they will succeed. The Governor has indicated that he will sign it into law, and then – the actual work of preservation and rehabilitation begins.

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