

LOCAL FOOD AND FARM COUNCIL

Meeting Minutes

Date:		Start Time	Location			Recorder
09/01/2023		9:02 a.m.	via Zoom Video Conferencing			Jacquette Maynard
This Council is composed of the following agencies, farmers, and restaurateurs:	University of the Virgin Islands (UVI)	Department of Agriculture (VIDA)	Department of Education (VIDE)	Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR)	Economic Development Authority (USVI EDA)	
	Farmer (TBA)	Farmer (TBA)	Farmer (TBA)	Restaurateur (TBA)	Restaurateur (TBA)	
Voting Members/Designees Present:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-chair: Dr. David Hall – President (UVI) Co-chair: Dr. Louis E. Petersen, Jr., – Commissioner Nominee (VIDE) Member: Wayne L. Biggs, Jr., – Chief Executive Officer (EDA) Member: Dr. Usman Adamu – Dean and Director of the School Agriculture (UVI) DPNR Designee: Dr. Nicole F. Angeli – Director of Fish and Wildlife VIDE Designee: Harith Wickrema – President of Island Green Living 					
	Voting Members Absent:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Member: Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington – Commissioner (VIDE) Member: Jean-Pierre L. Oriol – Commissioner (DPNR) 				
Guest(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Torhera Durand – Sustainable Development Associate (UVI Research & Technology Park, Corp) Mindy Solivan – Director (UVI Office of Sponsored Programs) Dr. Lawanda Cummings – Director (Eastern Caribbean Center/ Social Sciences Research Institute) 					

I. Welcome, Introduction of Members and Charge

- The meeting was called to order at 11:02 a.m. by Dr. Hall, Co-Chair of the Local Food and Farm Council.
- Dr. Hall welcomed all members and guests to the meeting and expressed gratitude for their participation.
- Dr. Hall acknowledged Dr. Petersen for chairing the previous meeting and commended his excellent job. He mentioned his intention to shift more hosting responsibilities to Dr. Petersen due to their Co-Chair roles.

II. Meeting Minutes: August 18, 2023

- There were no corrections or changes observed to the Minutes.
- Director Biggs motioned to approve the Meeting Minutes as presented; seconded by Dr. Angeli.

III. EDA presentation on proposed guidelines for Public-Private Investment Fund and Farmers Grant Matching Fund

Attachment: [Agriculture Grant Match Programs](#)

A. Proposed Agriculture Grant Match Program:

- Director Biggs presented a proposal for an Agriculture Grant Matching Fund Program. He emphasized the collaborative nature of the proposal and its flexibility for input from the Council. Director Biggs discussed the program's objective to assist farmers in pursuing grants for various farm-related activities. He shared that farmers could access the fund as matching funds for approved grants. The program aims to support farmers in increasing yield, improving farming processes, preparing land, purchasing equipment, and integrating technology. Director Biggs outlined the eligibility criteria, including being a licensed commercial farmer, maintaining good standing with VIDA, and reporting yield information annually. He shared the proposed grant match for Individual Farmers, as well as Multiple Farmers (Cooperatives, Partnerships, etc.) and the allowable maximum amount per grant in a calendar year. Director Biggs presented a comprehensive "Use of Proceeds" list and sought input from Dr. Petersen.
- Discussion Points:**
 - Dr. Petersen expressed agreement with the distinction between individual and partnership farmers regarding their limits in the Proposal. He suggested including "farming and value-added processing equipment as eligible for funding

to enhance clarity. These items should be listed under the “Use of Proceeds.” Dr. Petersen also suggested adding livestock and poultry housing as an allowable Use of Proceeds in the matching fund guidelines. **Director Biggs agreed. He confirmed that the farming and processing-related equipment could be covered and suggested that the “farming and value-added processing equipment be specifically outlined to avoid misinterpretation. Also, he mentioned the flexibility to adjust limits and percentages based on the Council’s approval.**

- Dr. Hall raised concerns regarding the \$40,000 annual limit and whether it applies to the individual farmer or group of farmers. He also highlighted the adequacy of the \$10,000 matching fund and suggested a need for greater flexibility to accommodate certain grants. Dr. Hall emphasized the importance of assessing how the proposed limits might impact a farmer’s access to available grants He discussed his experience with larger grants and match percentages and proposed incorporating language that would empower the committee to adjust limits through a majority vote. Further, given her expertise, Dr. Hall invited Director Solivan to share her perspective on the proposal.
- Dr. Usman expressed concern about the ability of small farmers to meet the matching fund requirements and whether they will benefit from the proposal. **Dr. Hall explained that the farmers wouldn’t need to arrange their matching funds. Instead, the proposal stipulates that the matching funds will be provided to farmers in accordance with the proposal requirements.**
- Mr. Wickrema proposed expanding the scope of the “Use of Proceeds” category to include farming technology advancements like hydroponics. **Director Biggs stated that technology was already mentioned in the proposal’s description; however, he will specifically list hydroponics and aquaponics as suggested.**
- Dr. Angeli suggested that the proposal should clearly define the grant match percentage and cap limits. She stated to include language that encourages creative approaches to meet grant match percentages beyond monetary contributions and adaptable cap limits. **Director Biggs agreed to build on this suggestion and proposed incorporating the Council’s assistance to explore alternative sources of matching funds.**
- Dr. Hall proposed enhancing training materials by adding information about the Council’s role and introducing alternative sources for matching funds. He said that the SBDC, and by extension, the ABC, would be a good partner to get information to the farmers. **Director Solivan agreed to provide assistance in identifying these alternative match sources.**
- Director Solivan shared valuable insights on the diverse forms of matching funds, such as in-kind contributions and the allocation of personnel time. She recommended appointing a committee to assess the impact and consider the feasibility of adjusting grant match limits. Additionally, she recommended incorporating training content that educates participants about alternative methods of matching funds. **Director Biggs concurred and suggested that the proposal could include a note acknowledging the Committee’s authority to adjust based on potential impact.**

Action Item(s):

- 1. Director Biggs will update the Grant Matching Program Proposal with the agreed-upon recommendations, such as expanding the “Use of Proceeds” list and modifying the language to include flexibility in grant match percent and cap limits.**
- 2. Consideration will be given to incorporating and promoting information on alternative match forms into training programs.**
- 3. The revised program proposal will be distributed to the Council for continued collaboration and subsequent review and approval of the proposal.**
- 4. Establish a committee to evaluate the feasibility of grant matching limits.**

B. USVI EDA – Loan Programs Available to Farmers:

- Director Biggs presented an overview of the existing loan programs administered by the EDA. Specifically, he highlighted a program dedicated to farmers and fishers, requiring 3-years in commercial farming or fishing and minimum annual sales of \$1,000. The program offers local and federal direct loans up to a maximum of \$50,000 with a fixed 4% interest rate and over a 10-years. Another loan option is the Micro-Credit Loan program, applicable to those not meeting the 3-year requirement. Applicants must be in the US Virgin Islands or be a resident for at least 5 years. This maximum direct loan amount is \$50,000, with a 5% interest rate over a 5-year term. Additionally, Director Biggs discussed various other financing options, including the EDA and SBDC loan programs. These loan programs cater to various businesses, including farmers, and outline the terms, loan amounts, and interest rates. He also shared that new financing initiatives are available and guaranteed programs such as loan participation, loan guarantees, payment shortage, performance bond programs, and

collateral support. Director Biggs emphasized EDA's commitment as a development loan agency dedicated to fostering economic growth and providing flexible solutions accessible to farmers and fishers in the Territory.

- **Discussion Points:**

- o Dr. Hall expressed his appreciation for the many loan opportunities at the EDA that farmers and fishers have available to them. He emphasized the importance of sharing this information with the Agriculture Business Center (ABC). Dr. Hall mentioned that the ABC and SBDC should be aware of and collaborate with the EDA to distribute information on available resources to the farmers and fishers. He emphasized the need to finalize ABC's operation details. **Director Biggs confirmed that the EDA already works closely with SBDC. He said 90% of the business plans received come from the SBDC.**
- o Mr. Wickrema suggested that the EDA should host town halls to raise awareness about the opportunities offered. **Director Biggs shared the EDA's previous efforts, such as hosting town halls and collaborating with various entities for conferences and outreach. He said that these efforts will continue to include hosting annual conferences and outreach to promote opportunities for farmers. Also, he offered to speak at various forums to raise awareness about available resources, as requested.**
- o Dr. Hall stated that investment funds should be part of the efforts that the LFFC should explore and review different business models related to agriculture. He emphasized that the fund's purpose will be to help farmers to transform their businesses, particularly mid-tier and larger farmers. Dr. Hall discussed the need for capital infusion for farmers looking to expand or diversify into new fields. He proposed a model where the government invests in the farms, allowing them to grow, and then convert the investment into a loan when the farm is in a better financial situation. Dr. Hall and Director Biggs discussed the need for a nonprofit entity to administer the fund and the importance of having sound investment principles.

Action Item(s):

1. Dr. Hall and Director Biggs will further meet to develop the investment fund concept.

IV. UVI Office: Sponsored Program, Grant Writer, and Eastern Caribbean Center (ECC) proposals

Attachment: [Agriculture Plan Briefing](#)

A. **Presentation on the ECC Briefing – Dr. Cummings:**

- Dr. Cummings began her presentation by expressing her excitement and gratitude for the opportunity to serve as the new director of the ECC. She mentioned the ECC's one-year anniversary and its commitment to continuing the legacy of Frank Mills in critical research and expertise within governmental spaces. Dr. Cummings emphasized the ECC's role in data collection, research, and its unique position as a State Data Center. She also highlighted the importance of collaboration and data sharing across various offices, mentioning ongoing projects and expertise within her team. Dr. Cummings discussed the proposed assessment plan, which includes annual farm surveys, agricultural business trends, project progression, and community awareness and support. She mentioned budget considerations and the need for temporary staff and a farmer liaison to ensure effective data collection, analysis, and communication. Dr. Cummings shared her vision for the ECC's role in supporting the Virgin Islands Agricultural Plan through data collection, assessment, and collaboration, highlighting the center's expertise and ongoing projects.
- **Discussion:**
 - o Dr. Petersen asked about the annual farm survey. **Dr. Cummings clarified that the EDD has participated in a farm survey in the past.**
 - o Dr. Hall discussed the need to review the list of items from the task force and request information on valid survey items, sources, and timeframe for starting. He also asked for a clear understanding of benchmarks and measurement of success from various units and projects. **Dr. Cummings responded to Dr. Hall's points, stating the ECC will provide a detailed budget and comparisons with other surveys. She also discussed the importance of defining success and suggested a comprehensive approach to assessing multiple projects' impact. Dr. Cummings stated expanding on a holistic approach and collaboration among different units.**

B. **Presentation on the Office of Sponsored Program (OSP) Briefing – Director Solivan:**

- Director Solivan discussed the funding strategy for Grant Writers and the structure of hiring Grant Writers, whether as full-time staff or through contracting work. She stated that several factors would influence such a decision, including the writers' knowledge of the specific area of focus and the complexities of hiring in the territory. Typically, the initial plan

is to immediately seek a contractor, targeting an average rate of \$75 per hour, and have this individual work approximately 20 hours a month for 12 months. This approach will help the OSP establish a foundation and eventually hire a full-time Grant Writer who can understand the Territory and build the local grant-writing workforce. Director Solivan also discussed salary considerations, aiming for a competitive rate of around \$60,000 with added fringe benefits, bringing the total closer to \$100,000 for a staff position. She stated that this strategy would allow the OSP to adapt the contractor's hours as their grant-writing needs evolve, providing a flexible and effective approach for their grant-writing initiatives.

- **Discussion:**
 - Dr. Hall summarized Director Solivan's approach, which involves starting with contracting and gradually moving towards full-time employment to begin immediately while allowing time for HR paperwork and recruitment. He supported this approach, emphasizing the need to assess incoming opportunities and the uncertainty of funding from the Legislature for the 2024 budget cycle. Dr. Hall mentioned the importance of demonstrating progress before seeking additional funding from the Legislature. Dr. Hall raised the question of how to measure the success of the contracting route and suggested that Director Solivan should consider this.
 - Director Solivan mentioned having some benchmarking measures in mind and highlighted the need for pre-and post-surveys to assess community needs. She mentioned conducting grant writing workshops and the importance of including training and workshops in the budget. Director Solivan explained that the current funding is separate from the operating budget of UVI and that they need to confirm its status.
 - Dr. Hall expressed concern about the recurring nature of the funds and the need to clarify funding specifics for different areas. He emphasized the importance of making a compelling case to the Legislature for continuing and increasing funds based on progress and utilization.
 - Director Solivan mentioned making progress with board approvals and expressed hope for pushing for more funds in the future. She noted the need for understanding VIDA's specific needs and requested collaboration with Petersen. Director Solivan emphasized the critical nature of targeting the right areas for her office's work and requested Dr. Petersen's assistance in facilitating a meeting with VIDA.

V. Proposed Survey for the Fishing Industry

Attachment: [Proposed Fishers Survey Questions](#)

- Dr. Hall emphasized the importance of the survey in understanding how approved programs can benefit the fishing industry. He suggested moving forward with the survey implementation unless there were strong objections from Council members. Dr. Hall invited Dr. Angeli to provide additional insights on the survey's development.
- Dr. Angeli confirmed the accuracy of the survey development process and expressed the value of gathering this information for future initiatives.
- Dr. Adamu suggested including demographic questions such as educational level and income.
- Director Biggs recommended indicating that the survey is for statistical purposes only to make respondents feel more comfortable.
- Mr. Wickrema expressed concerns raised by some farmers about the survey's personal questions.
- Dr. Hall clarified that the entire survey is optional and confidential, with no individual tracking.

Action Item(s):

1. **Dr. Hall, Dr. Angeli, and Ms. Maynard will meet to update the survey and the distribution strategy.**

VI. General LFFC Matters

- Dr. Hall mentioned other agenda items related to logos and future meeting dates, especially for November, which had some challenges due to holidays. He urged Council members to review the dates and inform of any conflicts by the next meeting.

VII. Next Meeting

- It was agreed that the next virtual LFFC meeting will be held on Friday, September 15, 2023, at 9:00 a.m.

VIII. Adjournment

- The meeting was adjourned at 10:43 a.m.