



Local Food and Farm Council

Meeting Minutes

June 28, 2024

Location		No. of Presenters	Start Time	End Time	Recorder
via Zoom Video Conferencing		0	9:06 a.m.	10:20 a.m.	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)
Present:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-chair: Dr. David Hall – President (UVI) • Co-chair: Dr. Louis E. Petersen, Jr., – Commissioner (VIDE) • DPNR Designee: Dr. Nicole F. Angeli – Director of Fish and Wildlife • Member: Wayne L. Biggs, Jr., – Chief Executive Officer (EDA) • VIDE Designee: Dr. Renee Charleswell – Deputy Commissioner of Curriculum and Instruction • VIDE Designee: Mr. Harith Wickrema – President of Island Green Living • Honorary Farmer Member: Dr. Nate Olive – Ridge to Reef Farm • Honorary Farmer Member: Mr. Royce Creque – Greenridge Guavaberry Farm • Honorary Farmer Member: Ms. Abeba Sellassie – The B-Hive Farm Collective • Honorary Fisher Member: Mr. Winston Ledee • Honorary Fisher Member Ms. Mavel Maldonado • Local Food and Farm Coordinator: Ms. Sommer Sibilly-Brown – VI Good Food Coalition 				
Absent:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member: Dr. Usman Adamu – Dean and Director of the School Agriculture (UVI) • Member: Jean-Pierre L. Oriol – Commissioner (DPNR) • Member: Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington – Commissioner • DPNR Designee: Dr. Sennai Habtes – Bureau Chief, Fisheries • Honorary Farmer Member: Mr. Edmon Titre – New Breed Farm 				

I. Welcome, Member Introductions, and Charge

- Dr. Hall called the meeting to order at 9:06 a.m.
- Dr. Hall welcomed all members and expressed gratitude for their presence and engagement.
- Dr. Angel introduced Mr. Winston Ledee as the Honorary Fisher Member, officially welcoming him to the Council.
- Subsequently, Dr. Angeli introduced Ms. Mavel Maldonado upon her arrival, and she was welcomed by members.

II. Meeting Minutes: June 14, 2024

- The minutes were reviewed, and no corrections or modifications were observed.
- Dr. Olive moved to approve the meeting minutes as presented, with Mr. Wickrema seconding the motion.
- The minutes were unanimously approved with no objections or abstentions.

III. Presentation: Dr. Nate Olive – Proposal on Certified Organic and Regenerative Ag as a component of the Ag Plan

Dr. Olive presented a proposal for the Council to consider incorporating certified organic and regenerative farming as a key feature of the Business Models for the VI Agricultural Plan. As a member of the Business Model subcommittee, he shared that this topic was previously discussed but did not make it into the Plan. He listed the benefits of organic farming, such as its economic impact, environmental benefits, and growing consumer demand. Dr. Olive emphasized the negative effects of synthetic fertilizers on the environment, including dead zones and coral bleaching. He shared survey results showing a strong interest in organic certification among local farmers, despite challenges like certification costs and lack of knowledge. To address these, he mentioned existing support programs and initiatives, such as USDA rebates and educational opportunities. Dr. Olive also discussed the potential for cooperative farming and niche marketing to enhance competitiveness and reduce costs, ultimately supporting sustainable agriculture.

Discussion:

- Dr. Petersen stated that he supports organic production due to the small footprint in the Territory and our delicate ecosystem. He said if we don't protect it, retroactive fixes will be difficult. Dr. Petersen said that he

appreciated Dr. Olive mentioning cooperatives, as they can address needs collectively. He inquired if Dr. Olive is more concerned about the practice being in place than farmers being certified. He also asked about buffer zones. Is it a concern if neighbors aren't practicing organic farming, that it can jeopardize certification?

- Dr. Olive stated that he represents the USDA's transition to the organic program, which aims for both organic practices on non-certified farms and certification for those who wish to use marketing tools like the organic logo. Both goals are important. In response to buffer zones, Dr. Olive stated these are critical considerations for organic farms to prevent contamination. He said certification involves documentation and third-party inspection to verify sustainability practices. Buffer zones can be established during the transitional period, such as planting certain trees. We recently launched a mentorship program to help farmers with these practices.
- Ms. Sellassie stated that she agrees with Dr. Olive and supports the wording. However, considering our small islands and the use of products like Roundup, we should phase in organic practices. Education and alternatives for current practices are crucial. Gradually phasing in organic practices makes sense.
 - Dr. Olive said that he agreed. It should be a choice for farmers, not mandatory, but encouraged for those who wish to pursue it.
- Mr. Wickrema stated that he supports Dr. Olive. He said we need to accelerate this for community health. Also, he recommended to Dr. Charleswell, that perhaps their program could educate children about the benefits of eating organic. Dr. Charleswell said she supports the recommendation. She said the agricultural curriculum is being developed, and integrating this information would be wise.
 - Dr. Olive stated that they have an educational curriculum for schools on organic production and that he will share the link.
- Dr. Hall stated that there seems to be no opposition to the proposal. He pointed out that the Ag Plan embraced sustainability. He said the Council needs to consider additional resources required for this effort. For example, if certification costs or organic fertilizers need funding, should the Council seek funds to support farmers? He asked Dr. Olive to outline any additional resource needs for this effort and share them by the next meeting. This will help in solidifying funding requests to the Legislature.

IV. Entity Update Presentation: Dr. Louis Petersen – Department of Agriculture

Dr. Petersen stated that his concern has been the movement of personnel requisition forms with OMB. He said that funds cannot be expended unless requisitions are approved. He said that his HR staff report has been the same for several weeks. Therefore, he had to take action and spoke with our previous director of OMB, who indicated they were transforming their PRF systems to a digital process. Unfortunately, they will not proceed and approve the requisition until they change over their system. With the Director at the OMB, his approach is to escalate the processing of the requisition by July 25th, which is also the VIDA Budget Hearing.

V. Entity Update Presentation: Dr. Renee Charleswell – Department of Education

Dr. Charleswell mentioned the recruitment challenges that were shared in the previous meetings. She said that after conducting a few meetings, she was pleased to announce that the Director of Sustainability for the Department has been selected and will be starting on July 1st. The new Director will visit sites, acquire necessary supplies, and ensure everything is ready when school begins in a few weeks. Dr. Charleswell thanked Mr. Wickrema for his contributions throughout the recruitment process. We couldn't move forward until the Director was officially on board, but now we can. It will take many hands to move this initiative and ensure we have a sustainable program within VIDE, she said. Simultaneously, our agriculture curriculum is being developed by our CTE program and the Instructional Development Council. We have adopted the CASE curriculum for agricultural science education, aligned with UVI certification for agriculture and the National Academy of Finance. This curriculum meets the needs of our program and the plan outlined within the act.

Discussion:

- Dr. Hall inquired if it would be possible for the Director to be present at the hearing on the 25th. He said it would help show progress to the Legislature. Also, he asked Dr. Charleswell and Dr. Peterson to summarize the updates they just gave in a paragraph and send it to Ms. Maynard to help in drafting the testimony.
 - Dr. Charleswell said that she has no concerns with the request and will have the Director present at the Legislature. Also, she said she would send the report in a Word document to Ms. Maynard.
- Mr. Wickrema commended Dr. Charleswell for her tenacity with this project. He stated that if we wait until July 1st and then update the Director on the aquaponic system, we can include this in the summary to the Legislature. He said that he would speak with the Director in the following week and provide technical information for the summary.

- Dr. Charleswell responded that a meeting can be scheduled for July 2nd, to discuss and start putting items in order.
- Dr. Olive asked if the members would be meeting the Director, or if they could know who the person in this role is.
 - Dr. Charleswell responded that the Director would be present at the next Council meeting.
- Ms. Sellassie inquired if Joseph Gomez School was selected for the pilot program. She said that she has been speaking with the principal and they are ready to participate. She asked Dr. Charleswell to consider including this school in the program.
 - Dr. Charleswell responded that Joseph Gomez was not considered and listed the schools in the program. She said in making this determination, they looked at the space available, and the commitment of the campus leaders. She said, if possible, they could include Joseph Gomez School. Dr. Charleswell said that she would reach out to the principal to discuss this, as accommodation can be made to include another location.

VI. Open Discussion

- Dr. Hall mentioned that the Budget Hearing testimony should include how much funds in each program have been expended. He said a report from all entities has been requested on funds received, expenditures, and carryovers. He asked Dr. Charleswell and Dr. Petersen to develop their respective reports and submit them to Ms. Maynard in time for the next meeting.
- Dr. Hall mentioned that there was a recent Farmer’s Forum held by Congresswoman Stacy Plaskett on June 26th for farmers and that there is a link available to this meeting.
- Dr. Hall informed the members that our Legal Counsel is also creating a 501(c)(3) for fundraising, allowing private contributions for distribution to farmers and fishers for different projects. He asked what name should the 501(c)(3) have. He made a recommendation for it to be the same name as this body, the Local Food and Farm Council. There were no objections to this recommendation.

VII. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 10:20 a.m.

VIII. Next Meeting

The following virtual LFFC meeting will be held **on Friday, July 12, 2024, at 9:00 a.m.**