



# Local Food and Farm Council

## Meeting Minutes

### July 12, 2024

Location		Members Present	Guest Presenters	Start Time	End Time	Recorder
via Zoom Video Conferencing		12	10	9:00 a.m.	10:34 a.m.	Jacquette Maynard
<b>This Council is composed of the following agencies, farmers, and restaurateurs:</b>	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)
<b>Present:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-chair: Dr. David Hall – President (UVI)</li> <li>• Co-chair: Dr. Louis E. Petersen, Jr., – Commissioner (VIDE)</li> <li>• Member: Wayne L. Biggs, Jr., – Chief Executive Officer (EDA)</li> <li>• Member: Dr. Usman Adamu – Dean and Director of the School Agriculture (UVI)</li> <li>• DPNR Designee: Dr. Nicole F. Angeli – Director of Fish and Wildlife</li> <li>• VIDE Designee: Dr. Renee Charleswell – Deputy Commissioner of Curriculum and Instruction</li> <li>• VIDE Designee: Mr. Harith Wickrema – President of Island Green Living</li> <li>• Honorary Farmer Member: Dr. Nate Olive – Ridge to Reef Farm</li> <li>• Honorary Farmer Member: Mr. Royce Creque – Greenridge Guavaberry Farm</li> <li>• Honorary Farmer Member: Ms. Abeba Sellassie – The B-Hive Farm Collective</li> <li>• Honorary Fisher Member: Mr. Winston Ledee</li> <li>• Local Food and Farm Coordinator: Ms. Sommer Sibilly-Brown – VI Good Food Coalition</li> </ul>					
<b>Absent:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member: Jean-Pierre L. Oriol – Commissioner (DPNR)</li> <li>• Member: Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington – Commissioner</li> <li>• DPNR Designee: Dr. Sennai Habtes – Bureau Chief, Fisheries</li> <li>• Honorary Farmer Member: Mr. Edmon Titre – New Breed Farm</li> <li>• Honorary Fisher Member Ms. Mavel Maldonado</li> </ul>					
<b>Guest Presenters:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mr. John Morosco, V.I. SBDC State Director</li> <li>• Ms. Shanta Roberts, Director, Agriculture Business Center</li> <li>• Ms. Karen Jones, V.I. SBDC Associate State Director</li> <li>• Dr. Rick Nader, Vice Provost for Res. &amp; Grad Stud</li> <li>• Dr. Jessica Venable, Partner – Thorn Run Partners</li> <li>• Dr. Ali Mohamed – Consultant / Retired Director Environmental Systems / National Institute of Agriculture (NIFA) USDA</li> <li>• Dr. Marissa Johnson Rogers, Assistant Director of ECC/SSRI</li> <li>• Ms. Trevesia Queeley-Richardson, Research Analyst II</li> <li>• Ms. Ayishih Bellew, ECC Statistician</li> <li>• Ms. Cydney Meadows, Director of Sustainability – VIDE</li> </ul>					

**I. Welcome, Member Introductions, and Charge**

Dr. Hall called the Local Food and Farm Council meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. He welcomed all members, support partners, and guests, emphasizing the importance of the Progress Update Meeting. Dr. Hall explained that each support partner entity was prepared to present its reports, which would assist the Council in preparing its testimony for the upcoming Finance, Budget, and Appropriations Committee Hearing. He thanked each presenter for their efforts.

**II. VI Agriculture Business Center Presentation**

Mr. John Morosco and Ms. Shay Roberts presented updates on the VI Agriculture Business Center. Mr. Morosco began by expressing his gratitude to Dr. Hall and the committee, emphasizing the center's mission to provide local farmers and fishers with small business education and resources at no charge. He detailed the initial challenges of establishing

the center, noting that it started with a blank canvas and required creating procedures and operational guidelines, often improvising solutions as they progressed.

Mr. Morosco described the center's activities, which include one-on-one consulting, business education, training, and technical assistance. He mentioned successful initiatives, such as assisting farmers with financial planning and agriculture licensing, and highlighted the importance of documenting client numbers to measure progress. He recounted significant milestones, including opening ceremonies for the St. Croix and St. Thomas locations and the recent addition of Ms. Roberts as Director.

Ms. Roberts, supported by Ms. Karen Jones, has been instrumental in developing the center's policies and procedures while actively engaging with clients. Mr. Morosco underscored the center's focus on building trust with farmers and fishers through both in-office and field interactions. He highlighted upcoming training sessions on disaster resiliency, financial preparedness, and compliance with new Treasury regulations affecting LLCs.

Ms. Roberts then updated the council on the center's client base, which currently serves 37 clients across all three islands and has recently added 13 new clients. She noted the center's achievements in hosting six training sessions and scheduling four more. Ms. Roberts has been networking with various stakeholders, including the School of Agriculture, EDA, and other universities, to enhance collaboration and resources for the center. She announced an upcoming visit from the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, which will present grant information to the local community.

Mr. Morosco and Ms. Roberts emphasized the center's commitment to coaching clients through the business development process, rather than doing the work for them, to ensure clients are well-prepared and knowledgeable about their ventures. They expressed appreciation for the council's support and encouraged referrals to the center for assistance with business plans, loans, and grants.

#### **Discussion:**

- Dr. Angeli inquired about the philosophy of assisting fishers and farmers with applications, mentioning the successful use of CPAs for hurricane disaster applications. She asked if there were discussions on providing direct assistance versus coaching due to the burdensome nature of some programs.
  - **Mr. Morosco** explained that they sit side by side with clients, coaching them through the process without writing the applications for them. This approach maintains client involvement.
  - **Ms. Jones** added that they assist clients hands-on, understanding the varying needs of their audience. They aim to empower clients to eventually handle applications independently.
- Dr. Petersen supported the approach of empowering farmers and suggested informing them beforehand that they need to be involved in creating business plans, as many expect these to be done for them.
- Ms. Sibilly-Brown (VI Good Food) raised concerns about assisting fishers who might be illiterate and asked for data on services per island, fisher versus farmer breakdown, and business maturity. She also requested gender data for future grant applications.
  - **Ms. Roberts** mentioned gauging clients' needs, providing more hands-on assistance when necessary, and ensuring clients understand the processes. She confirmed they have data on client demographics and will source detailed information as requested.
  - **Mr. Morosco** added that for clients unable to read or write, family members often assist, enabling clients to complete more of the process at home.
- Dr. Hall emphasized the importance of sensitivity to clients' literacy levels.
  - **Ms. Roberts** confirmed that detailed demographic data could be provided upon request.
- Royce Creque briefly expressed the need for further assistance for farmers.

### **III. Office of Sponsored Program Presentation**

Dr. Nader introduced the presentation by emphasizing the office's role in building capacity in the Territories for the Agricultural Plan, particularly through federal grants. He acknowledged Dr. Jessica Venable and Dr. Ali Mohamed as critical partners in these efforts.

Dr. Venable, a partner at Thorn Run Partners, introduced herself, highlighting her firm's specialization in federal grant-making and lobbying, with a focus on historically black colleges and universities and STEM fields. She detailed her work in assisting nonprofits, associations, community groups, and faculty in identifying and applying for funding opportunities.

Dr. Mohamed, retired Division Director for Omari Milton System in NIFA, shared his extensive experience managing grants and working with minority and small institutions. He highlighted his background in agricultural research and his role in developing new crops and nutrition-related agricultural systems.

Dr. Nader presented a brief overview of their ongoing projects and goals, emphasizing the importance of food security and independence through grants consulting. He mentioned the development of a grant's handbook and the upcoming training workshops and meetings with federal agencies, such as the USDA, to secure funding for the agriculture plan.

Dr. Venable added that they are exploring various communication methods to quickly disseminate information about funding opportunities and are actively engaging with the farming community to understand their grant capacity needs. She also emphasized the importance of post-award financial management and administration, noting their collaboration with UVI's post-award management team. Dr. Nader invited further collaboration with the Council and expressed eagerness to support and build capacity for USVI. He highlighted the hands-on coaching approach and the success of upcoming grant brainstorming sessions with Dr. Venable and Dr. Mohamed.

**Discussion:**

- Mr. Wickrema inquired if the presenters could make the PowerPoint presentation available to the Council members. He commented on the existence of many similar grants and the issue of departments working in silos and asked if the Council could cooperate to achieve the final result. Further, Mr. Wickrema mentioned a territory-wide composting project that Dr. Peterson is aware of and asked if the OSP could collaborate on this project as it would be helpful.
  - **Dr. Nader** affirmed that the presentation would be made available and mentioned that updates are made every one or two months.
  - **Dr. Nader** welcomed the opportunity to collaborate and break down silos, emphasizing the need for both the OSP and the Council to work closely to achieve shared goals.
  - **Dr. Nader** agreed to reach out and collaborate on the composting project.
- Dr. Hall asked how organizations focused on similar goals can work more closely together. Also, he inquired about the key partners currently engaged in informing about grants and helping with proposals. Dr. Hall suggested that the OSP consider partnering with the Fishing and Wildlife Division of DPNR.
  - **Dr. Nader** listed the key partners, including Avida, Dr. Peterson, Dean Adamu, UVI faculty, various nonprofits, and Dr. Gregory Guannel, and stated that they aim to expand their collaboration.
- Dr. Olive asked how a group of farmers can get connected and partner with the OSP
  - **Dr. Nader** expressed eagerness to meet and collaborate once the email addresses are received.
- Mr. Creque asked when the OSP will connect not only with organizations but also with individual farmers.
  - **Dr. Nader** confirmed that he would reach out to him as well.

**IV. Eastern Caribbean Center Presentation**

Dr. Johnson-Rogers, Assistant Director of the Eastern Caribbean Center (ECC), opened the presentation by outlining the ECC's charge to conduct annual surveys to assess agricultural activities and business trends in the territory. This initiative supports the Virgin Islands Agricultural Plan, developed in collaboration with the Agricultural Task Force and the Department of Agriculture. She said the ECC employs purposeful sampling in non-census years and systematic frameworks in census years to collect agricultural data. Past projects include the Agricultural Processing Plan Feasibility Study and the Virgin Islands Community Survey. The current data collection includes survey data, administrative data from public agriculture, and licensing information from consumer affairs.

Ms. Queeley-Richardson, Assistant Director, and Project Lead, reported the following key data points:

- 389 agricultural licenses were issued in 2023 (265 in St. Croix, 124 in St. Thomas/St. John).
- Government leases land to farmers, with 26 leases in St. Croix and 40 in St. Thomas/St. John.
- The Department of Agriculture received a \$250,000 Crop Block Grant in 2023.
- Local government allocated \$2.5 million to the Department of Agriculture.

Data collection highlights include:

- Home and community gardening: Surveys conducted at agricultural events in St. Croix and St. Thomas with 268 participants, revealing that 54% of respondents engage in home gardening.
- Farmers and fishermen: Telephone surveys with 206 commercial farmers and 60 commercial fishermen, requiring participants to be licensed and active in 2023.

The presentation concluded with demographic data and consumption patterns of homegrown produce, emphasizing that a significant portion of respondents consume more than 75% of what they grow.

## **Discussion:**

- Dr. Petersen thanked the presenters for their work and asked if the information presented would be shared with everyone. He suggested that the data regarding the number of licensed farmers and the production ecosystem should be presented per year due to fluctuations.
- Dr. Olive echoed Dr. Petersen's sentiments and raised questions about the tables shown, specifically whether the average amount per farmer was a mean or a median average. He also pointed out that some figures seemed off and suggested including the number of farmers producing each crop in the table. Additionally, he shared concerns about receiving survey calls from unknown numbers and suggested making the caller ID more credible.
- Ms. Sibilly-Brown asked if the data was self-reported by farmers and how it compared to Schedule F submissions and crop loss reports. She also inquired about the discrepancy between the number of farmers and the number of land leases and licenses, questioning the assumption that many farmers operate on privately owned land.
- Dr. Angeli thanked Ms. Queeley Richardson for attending fisher registration meetings and mentioned that she had some numbers that could be used to address concerns regarding the accuracy of the data on landings. She noted that there had been no correspondence yet but offered to provide the necessary information.
  - **Ms. Queeley Richardson** and **Ms. Bellew** clarified that the average amount per farmer was a mean average, and they were considering ways to present the data more clearly. They acknowledged the issue with unknown numbers on survey calls and mentioned efforts to improve caller ID credibility. They explained that the numbers regarding land leases and licenses were provided by the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs, not self-reported by farmers. They also noted plans to include supplemental tables for better clarity.
  - **Dr. Johnson-Rogers** assured that they were working on resolving the caller ID issue to make survey calls more credible.
  - **Ms. Queeley-Richardson** also responded to Dr. Angeli, stating that they were in the process of obtaining additional information from a contractor and Dr. Habtes to update the report accordingly.

## **V. Summary of Presentations and Acknowledgements**

- Dr. Hall thanked all presenters for their valuable reports and underscored the significance of advancing the Agricultural Plan. He stressed the need to prepare for the Senate Budget Hearing and proposed a dedicated future meeting for comprehensive data review and policy discussion.
- Dr. Hall welcomed Ms. Cydney Meadows, Director of Sustainability, who introduced herself and shared her extensive background in agriculture and education.
- Dr. Hall confirmed that the winners of the PPPI Grant Program will be publicly announced following Council approval, addressing Ms. Roberts' inquiry from the Agriculture Business Center.

## **VI. Meeting Minutes: June 28, 2024**

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

## **VII. Open Discussion**

- Dr. Hall announced that the budget hearing is scheduled for the 25th, with testimony due by the 18th. He will collaborate closely with Commissioner Petersen, and the LFFC's Admin Team to prepare the testimony. Once a draft is ready, it will be circulated to council members for feedback. Hall emphasized the importance of including proposed maintenance and increases in funding and requested prompt input due to the tight timeline.
- Dr. Hall also asked members of the Selection Committee for public-private funding to stay after the meeting for an additional 10 minutes to receive important information from Ms. Maynard and Ms. Brown. It was noted that only the Selection Subcommittee members should remain to maintain confidentiality and impartiality.
- Dr. Hall then opened the floor for a brief discussion but received no additional comments. He reminded attendees that the next meeting is scheduled for the day after the hearing and encouraged those on St. Croix to attend if possible. He thanked everyone for their participation and acknowledged their efforts in advancing the agriculture plan. The selection committee members were asked to stay, while others were excused.

## **VIII. Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 10:34 a.m.

## **IX. Next Meeting**

The following virtual LFFC meeting will be held **on Friday, July 26, 2024, at 9:00 a.m.**