



# Local Food and Farm Council

## Meeting Minutes

### February 7, 2025

Location		No. of Attendees	No. of Presenters	Start Time	End Time	Recorder
via Zoom Video Conferencing		11	2	9:00 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"><li>Co-chair: Dr. Louis E. Petersen, Jr., – Commissioner (VIDE)</li><li>Co-chair: Dr. Safiya George – President (UVI)</li><li>Member: Wayne L. Biggs, Jr., – Chief Executive Officer (EDA)</li><li>DPNR Designee: Dr. Nicole F. Angeli – Director of Fish and Wildlife</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 – Ityopia Rootz Farm</li><li>Honorary Fisher Member: Mr. Winston Ledee</li><li>Director, Agriculture Business Center: Ms. Shanta Roberts (AgBC)</li><li>State Sustainability Director: Cydney Meadows (VIDE)</li><li>Program Assistant to State Sustainability Director: Sumayah Milan Bryan</li></ul>					
Absent:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Member: Dr. Usman Adamu – Dean and Director of the School Agriculture (UVI)</li><li>Member: Jean-Pierre L. Oriol – Commissioner (DPNR)</li><li>Member: Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington – Commissioner</li><li>VIDE Designee: Mr. Harith Wickrema – President of Island Green Living</li><li>VIDE Designee: Dr. Renee Charleswell – Deputy Commissioner of Curriculum and Instruction</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><li>Local Food and Farm Coordinator: Ms. Sommer Sibilly-Brown – VI Good Food Coalition</li></ul>					
Support Partner: (Eastern Caribbean Center - UVI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Dr. Marissa Johnson Rogers, Assistant Director, ECC/SSRI</li><li>Ms. Ayishih Bellew, ECC Statistician</li></ul>					

#### I. Call to Order

Dr. Petersen called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m.

#### II. Opening Remarks, Attendance, and Agenda Overview

- Dr. Petersen welcomed all members and LFFC Presenters of the Eastern Caribbean Center (ECC). He outlined the agenda, emphasizing the ECC presentation regarding data collection efforts mandated by the USVI Ag Plan.

#### III. Presentation: Eastern Caribbean Center (ECC) Data Collection

**Presenter:** Dr. Marissa Johnson Rogers

Dr. Johnson Rogers introduced the ECC's role in facilitating an annual survey to assess agricultural activities, business trends, and production across the territory. The data is critical for tracking progress and addressing challenges in implementing the Virgin Islands Agricultural Plan.

##### Key Points:

- ECC has developed an evaluation plan with the Agricultural Task Force and the Department of Agriculture.
- Data collection methods involve purposeful sampling, statistical analysis, and maintenance of a longitudinal database.

- ECC has experience with agricultural feasibility studies and local food consumer surveys.

**Presenter:** Ms. Ayishih Bellew

Ms. Bellew provided insights into past and current data collection efforts:

- **Home Gardener Survey:** Measured production, consumption, waste, and sales of backyard farmers.
- **Fishers & Licensed Farmers Survey:** Analyzed production, sales, and distribution trends.
- **Restaurant & Grocers Survey (October-December 2024):** Assessed local food sourcing, identifying significant gaps in participation.
  - **Notable findings:**
    - Older businesses were more likely to purchase locally.
    - Restaurants were primary buyers of vegetables, while grocers exhibited lower participation.
    - Restaurants predominantly reported local seafood purchases.
    - Lobster was the most frequently purchased seafood item, though reported quantities were significantly lower than actual catch data.

#### **Future Data Collection Efforts**

Dr. Johnson Rogers outlined ECC's plans for 2025:

- **Farmers & Fishers Survey:** Telephone survey utilizing ECC's Caddy Lab.
- **Home Gardener Survey:** Conducted at the St. Croix Agricultural Fair.
- **Agricultural Business Trends Survey:** March-April 2025 data collection from grocers and restaurants.
- **Strategic Benefits of Data Collection:** Supports operational efficiency, decision-making, and industry collaboration.

#### **Discussion:**

Mr. Creque inquired about the process for engaging business owners in surveys.

**Response:** Dr. Johnson Rogers explained outreach efforts via phone, email, and in-person visits, noting businesses' reluctance to participate. Relationships with local business contacts helped improve responses.

Dr. Angeli queried about data extrapolation methods for underreported restaurant purchases.

**Response:** Ms. Bellew acknowledged the challenge and suggested incorporating statistical modeling to estimate actual numbers better using multiple data sources.

Mr. Ledee expressed concern over the accuracy of reported seafood purchases, stating that the actual numbers are much higher based on his commercial fishing experience.

Ms. Sellassie asked why St. John restaurants reported no local purchases and whether the survey considered businesses targeting locals vs. tourists.

**Response:** Ms. Bellew agreed to investigate further and suggested adding business sector classifications in future surveys.

Dr. Olive proposed implementing a local food certification sticker for businesses that purchase local produce and seafood to incentivize survey participation.

Dr. Petersen emphasized the need for improved participation strategies and better alignment of survey timelines with existing reporting requirements.

**Response:** Dr. Johnson Rogers committed to refining outreach efforts, incorporating feedback, and providing additional updates on data analysis and recommendations for improving engagement.

#### **IV. Meeting Minutes: January 24, 2025**

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

#### **V. Public-Private Partnership Investment Fund Grant Program (Planning-2025)**

Dr. Petersen emphasized the importance of planning for the 2025 PPPIF Grant Program. He presented two key documents for review: the 2024 application for funding and the eligibility criteria for applicants. He also reminded attendees of last year's initial screening process. He reiterated a suggestion from the prior year's Workshop Planning that farmers and fishermen from the community should serve as the primary reviewers before applications proceed, so the PPPIF subcommittee. Further, Dr. Petersen outlined several key concerns for consideration, particularly the need for confirmed funding to support the programs. He noted that while funding is anticipated, it has not yet been officially approved.

Dr. Petersen reviewed the memo requesting the members develop a process for the grant program reviewers. Feedback should be submitted by February 21<sup>st</sup>, consolidated, and presented for discussion during the March 7<sup>th</sup> meeting.

**Discussion:**

Dr. George inquired about the total amount distributed in last year's PPPIF Grant Program, to which Dr. Petersen responded that it was just over \$500,000. Dr. George then elaborated on the complexity of the current funding situation, explaining that legislative actions, gubernatorial vetoes, and overrides had created challenges. She indicated that the legislature identified that \$500,000 from the School of Agriculture's academic programs should be allocated for this grant program if external funding remained uncertain.

Director Biggs expressed concerns about planning for this year's grant program. He stressed the importance of securing funding before opening the application process to avoid creating false expectations among potential applicants. He strongly advised against releasing applications until the funds were confirmed. Dr. George reassured the Council that UVI remains committed to supporting agriculture and will provide financial support if necessary.

**VI. Upcoming Events Planning**

**1. Public Forum on Farmers' Market Initiative**

- Scheduled for Tuesday, February 11, 2024, from 6:00 PM to 8:00 PM at UVI's Innovation Center.
- Hybrid format available.
- WTJX invited representatives to speak at the forum earlier in the day.
- Dr. Petersen encouraged members to spread the word and ensure broad participation.

**2. AgriFest 2025 Participation (February 15-17, 2024)**

- The Council will participate with an information booth and giveaway items.
- Members were requested to share availability with Ms. Maynard to create a schedule.
- Ms. Maynard confirmed that promotional items and materials will be provided.

**VII. Open Discussion**

**1. Agriculture Business Center:**

Ms. Roberts shared an important update regarding business support for cannabis-related ventures:

- A recent client sought assistance developing a business plan for a cannabis-related enterprise.
- As the SBDC operates under federal guidelines, it cannot assist cannabis-related businesses due to federal restrictions.
- The client is now pursuing a hemp-based business instead, which aligns with federal regulations.

Ms. Roberts also provided the following announcements regarding funding availability:

- Due to President Trump's executive order impacting DEI policies, some grants and funding programs have been paused.
- Certain grants, such as the REAP Grant and EQIP, have already been affected, causing delays in funding disbursements.
- She advised all members to stay informed about potential funding restrictions, particularly those affecting agricultural grants and loans.

**2. LFFC Status of Roles and Support:**

Dr. Olive inquired about the status of the Coordinator position.

**Response:** Dr. Petersen provided an update, stating that:

- The legislation was successfully amended to allow funding to be directed to the appropriate entity.
- A request to release funds has been submitted, but funds have not yet been released.
- Additionally, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has frozen Professional Service Requests (PRFs) since November 2023, delaying new requests and approvals.

Dr. Petersen acknowledged the broader financial challenges within the Territory, noting that some vendors withhold services due to unpaid government invoices.

Mr. Creque asked whether UVI could hire the Coordinator instead of the Department of Agriculture to expedite the process.

**Response:** Dr. Petersen expressed enthusiasm for the idea, and Dr. George clarified that:

- The bill initially allocated \$383,000 to UVI instead of the Department of Agriculture.
- To proceed with hiring, the funds must first be assigned a fund number at UVI.

- She proposed holding an offline discussion with UVI's CFO, Dr. Vanterpool, to explore the feasibility of hiring under UVI's administration.

Director Biggs raised a related concern, noting that several positions tied to these funds have remained unfilled for four years due to funding delays. He added that some government financial constraints stem from a tax filing delay under the Biden administration, which shifted the corporate tax filing deadline from October to February.

**Response:** Dr. Petersen acknowledged these factors and reiterated that securing funding remains a priority.

### **3. *Reinstating the FFA in the Territory:***

Dr. Petersen shared that he would meet with the Lieutenant Governor's office between today and Monday to further clarify the next steps for reinstating the Future Farmers of America (FFA) as an entity within the Territory.

- Ms. Meadows expressed interest in being included in the conversation or receiving updates following the meeting.

### **4. *Coordination of Agricultural Events:***

Dr. Petersen raised a concern regarding event coordination and scheduling conflicts. He noted that a separate farmers-focused event was initially scheduled for the same date as the February 11th Public Forum and expressed the importance of better coordination moving forward.

- Ms. Sellassie confirmed that the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition had rescheduled its focus group session to February 10th to avoid overlapping events. She further explained that the Good Food Coalition's event on February 10th will follow up on the November Agriculture Summit, featuring focus group discussions on key agricultural issues, including land access and prescription programs.
  - Dr. Petersen thanked Ms. Sellassie for the update and emphasized the need for ongoing communication to prevent future scheduling conflicts.

## **VIII. New Business and Key Updates**

- Dr. Petersen invited discussion on any new business. No additional items were raised.

## **IX. Meeting Adjournment**

With no further business, Dr. Petersen called for a motion to adjourn.

- **Motion to adjourn:** Director Biggs
- **Seconded by:** Dr. George

The motion was carried, and the meeting was adjourned at 10:20 a.m.

## **X. Next Meeting**

- The next virtual LFFC meeting will be held on Friday, February 21, 2025, at 9:00 a.m. via Zoom.