



# Local Food and Farm Council

## Meeting Minutes for Workshop Session III

### December 6, 2024

Location		Members Present	Presenters	Start Time	End Time	Recorder
via Zoom Video Conferencing		14	2	9:02 a.m.	10:39 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: 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: Mr. Harith Wickrema – President of Island Green Living</li><li>• VIDE Designee: Dr. Renee Charleswell – Deputy Commissioner of Curriculum and Instruction</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: Mr. Edmon Titre – New Breed Farm</li><li>• Honorary Farmer Member: Ms. Abeba Sellassie – Ityopia Rootz Farm</li><li>• Honorary Fisher Member: Mr. Winston Ledee</li><li>• Director of Sustainability: Cydney Meadows (VIDE)</li><li>• Director, Agriculture Business Center: Ms. Shanta Roberts (AgBC)</li><li>• Local Food and Farm Coordinator: Ms. Sommer Sibilly-Brown – VI Good Food Coalition</li></ul>					
Absent:	<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>• Member: Wayne L. Biggs, Jr., – Chief Executive Officer (EDA)</li><li>• Honorary Fisher Member Ms. Mavel Maldonado</li></ul>					

#### I. Call to Order

Dr. Petersen called the meeting to order at 9:02 a.m.

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

- Dr. Petersen commenced the meeting with a warm welcome to all attendees and acknowledged their presence. He confirmed attendance and noted that Director Biggs was absent with excuse, and other members may have joined late.
- Dr. Petersen proposed changing the agenda and prioritizing the two scheduled presentations before the workshop discussion. The proposed agenda adjustment was unanimously approved.

#### III. Meeting Minutes: November 22, 2024

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

#### IV. Presentation 1: Department of Education [Seeds of Security Program] - Cydney Meadows, Director of Sustainability Overview of the Presentation:

Ms. Meadows delivered an informative presentation on integrating sustainability and agricultural education into a locally tailored curriculum for the Virgin Islands. Her presentation emphasized the program's alignment with educational initiatives, cultural heritage, environmental needs, and food security objectives by developing an inquiry-

based curriculum spanning pre-K through the first year of college. Ms. Meadows emphasized the program's alignment with FFA (Future Farmers of America) standards, ensuring students access leadership development opportunities and agricultural education resources consistent with national benchmarks. The program also seeks to re-establish partnerships with local FFA chapters to integrate experiential learning opportunities. Further, the curriculum emphasizes inclusivity, cultural relevance, and cross-disciplinary opportunities, preparing students for agriculture, legislation, medicine, and sustainability careers. It incorporates practical experiences such as internships and capstone projects to provide hands-on learning. Ms. Meadows highlighted efforts to reduce reliance on imported food, foster local food sovereignty, and collaborate with organizations like Eco-Schools and the USDA to implement teaching greenhouses, aquaponics, and solar-powered infrastructure. These initiatives aim to build a resilient and sustainable future for the Virgin Islands.

Please refer to the [Presentation Overview](#) for a more detailed account of Ms. Meadows' presentation.

#### Discussion:

1. Dr. Olive asked about integrating soil-based agricultural practices into the curriculum. He expressed concern that the emphasis on aquaponics might overshadow soil-based farming, which remains critical to local agriculture.
  - **Response:** Ms. Meadows reassured Dr. Olive that soil-based practices are integral to the curriculum. She acknowledged the importance of soil management and composting and shared plans to collaborate with waste management and Eco-Schools to enhance this aspect of the program.
2. Dr. Petersen inquired whether the curriculum aligned with established standards such as FFA (Future Farmers of America) and whether pilot schools actively participated in the process.
  - **Response:** Ms. Meadows confirmed that the curriculum is aligned with FFA standards and that Jill Wagner, an FFA liaison, has been involved throughout. She also stated that pilot schools actively participate in the program's development.
3. Dr. Adamu raised concerns about the lack of local demand for tilapia and asked about exploring alternative aquaculture species.
  - **Response:** Ms. Meadows acknowledged this issue, highlighting prawns as a viable alternative that aligns better with local dietary preferences. She emphasized the importance of tailoring aquaponics to meet the needs of the Virgin Islands community.
4. Mr. Wickrema praised Cydney Meadows for introducing Chaya (Mexican spinach) as a nutrient-dense, drought-resistant crop and asked about its integration into school lunch programs.
  - **Response:** Ms. Meadows elaborated on plans to incorporate Chaya into schools as part of food security initiatives. She discussed its nutritional benefits and adaptability while noting the need to educate communities on its preparation.
5. Mr. Creque emphasized the need for government agencies and stakeholders to work collaboratively, pointing out inefficiencies caused by siloed approaches.
  - **Response:** Ms. Meadows agreed with Mr. Creque's sentiments, and other members echoed the need for collaboration, emphasizing the Food and Farm Council's role in creating unity among the various organizations and agencies.
6. Mr. Wickrema asked about tangible accomplishments since Ms. Meadows began her role in July, especially in light of bureaucratic challenges.
  - **Response:** Ms. Meadows outlined her progress, including pilot programs with 16 teachers, forming partnerships, curriculum advancements, and resource procurement. She highlighted the foundational work of building relationships and facilitating collaboration.
7. Dr. Angeli described ongoing research into commercially viable fish and shellfish species for the Virgin Islands. She mentioned funding from NOAA and the Office of Insular Affairs to support mariculture projects.
  - Ms. Roberts shared information about a recent grant submission for exploring local seafood preferences and plans for public sampling events to gather data.
  - **Response:** Ms. Meadows expressed excitement about these efforts and the potential to integrate findings into the curriculum, reinforcing the importance of collaboration among stakeholders.

Mr. Wickrema delivered a compelling presentation on sustainable agriculture and food security in the Virgin Islands, emphasizing integrating traditional farming methods with modern techniques such as hydroponics, aquaponics, and aeroponics to address environmental challenges like severe weather. He advocated for initiatives including container gardening, edible landscaping, and showcasing hydroponic systems in supermarkets and restaurants to promote locally grown produce. Mr. Wickrema also highlighted the importance of prioritizing local farmers in procurement for school lunch programs and reducing food waste by securing reliable markets for farmers' produce. His presentation called for stakeholder collaboration to develop innovative solutions and ensure the region's agricultural sustainability.

Please refer to the [Presentation Overview](#) for a more detailed account of Mr. Wickrama's presentation.

#### Discussion:

1. Dr. Olive raised concerns about the procurement language in the farm-to-school program, which currently allows for imported crops if local produce is unavailable. He shared a file with the existing language and explained how this policy led to supermarkets importing food rather than sourcing it locally. Olive emphasized the need for stronger legislative language to protect local farmers.
  - **Response:** Mr. Wickrema agreed and offered to take the proposed language to the USDA and local legislators to advocate for prioritizing local produce in school programs. He reiterated the importance of supporting farmers to ensure secure crop markets.
2. Mr. Creque expressed interest in exploring hydroponics and aquaponics as alternative farming methods to overcome challenges like soil regeneration after storms. However, he pointed out that funding remains a significant barrier for farmers to adopt these technologies.
  - **Response:** Mr. Wickrema acknowledged the funding challenges and encouraged local initiatives to focus on addressing gaps left by existing grants. He emphasized the need for collaboration to secure farmers' resources
3. Dr. Adamu shared insights on CES's mission to support local farmers through research, academic curriculum, and extension programs. He encouraged collaboration with CES for events and initiatives involving farmers, particularly in St. John and St. Thomas, where CES offices are located.
  - **Response:** Mr. Wickrema welcomed the offer and suggested including CES in future press releases and activities. He highlighted the potential for CES to play a critical role in supporting local agricultural initiatives.
4. Mr. Creque emphasized the need for funding opportunities tailored to farmers at the start of the supply chain. He highlighted the importance of ensuring fair prices for farmers and enabling them to expand their operations.
  - **Response:** Mr. Wickrema supported Creque's point, emphasizing that local farmers must feel secure about their investments and fairly compensated. He noted that strengthening local agriculture aligns with the region's goal of reducing food imports.
5. Mr. Petersen proposed that initiatives can fill the funding gaps left by larger grant programs, particularly focusing on supporting farmers directly. He suggested leveraging the council's resources to advocate for these changes.
  - **Response:** Mr. Wickrema agreed and emphasized the need for collaboration and innovative thinking among council members and stakeholders.

#### Additional Highlights:

1. **Master Calendar Proposal:** Mr. Wickrema proposed creating a centralized master calendar to coordinate community events, ensuring organizations do not compete for attendance or resources.
2. **Collaboration Among Stakeholders:** Mr. Wickrema suggested forming project-based collaborations among members to maximize resources and expertise. He called for a culture of cooperation rather than competition to advance agricultural initiatives.

#### VI. Grant Opportunities and Strategic Oversight

Dr. Adamu emphasized the importance of the Agriculture Business Center and the Office of Sponsored Programs in identifying grants to support farmers.

- Mr. Wickrema proposed establishing a cabinet-level position to oversee grant applications and utilization, citing past instances of unused funds.
- Dr. Petersen acknowledged the suggestion, emphasizing the need for streamlined processes to secure and maximize funding.

## **VII. Workshop III Discussions and Key 2025 Strategies for the Virgin Islands Agricultural Plan**

### **Recap of Workshop II Discussion**

- Dr. Petersen opened the final segment by outlining the goal to finalize discussions on Mandates 7 and 8. He reminded the council that they had previously reviewed Mandates 1-6 in previous sessions.

### **Mandate #7: Education and Training:**

- Dr. Petersen began the discussion on Mandate 7, focusing on the critical need to strengthen education and training initiatives for agriculture in the Virgin Islands. He highlighted key action items, including hosting relevant conferences, aligning curricula with higher education requirements, and addressing resource needs.
- **Addressing Teacher Shortages:**
  - Ms. Cydney Meadows highlighted a critical challenge: the significant shortage of agriculture teachers in the territory. She informed the council that only three agriculture teachers were based in St. Croix, while two had recently relocated to Georgia.
  - Dr. Usman Adamu emphasized the importance of addressing this issue and suggested the development of a curriculum at UVI that combines agriculture education with teacher training. He noted that student teaching experiences and professional development are essential to such a program. Dr. Petersen added that short-term solutions, such as the Agriculture in the Classroom initiative, could help fill immediate gaps.
  - Ms. Meadows mentioned conversations with students interested in becoming agriculture teachers. She shared that one student stated it was their long-term goal, further underscoring the potential to "grow our teachers" through initiatives like the Seeds of Security program and agricultural integration across various subjects.
- **Curriculum Alignment and Action Plans:**
  - Dr. Petersen stressed the importance of aligning K-13 curricula with higher education and agricultural careers, referencing ongoing efforts within the Department of Education. Ms. Meadows highlighted the need for intentional curriculum development tailored to the territory's specific needs, including incorporating agriculture into multiple disciplines.
  - Dr. Petersen proposed formally reinstating the Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter as an action item. Ms. Meadows confirmed progress on this, reporting that articles of incorporation had been drafted and submitted to the Lieutenant Governor's office for final approval.
- **Funding and Resource Allocation**
  - Dr. Petersen raised concerns about the adequacy of funding for these initiatives, noting that legislative appropriations may not be sufficient. He suggested seeking external grants and partnerships. Ms. Meadows added that funding would also be essential for Agriculture in the Classroom programs and other short-term initiatives to address teacher shortages.
  - Dr. Adamu stressed the importance of securing sustainable funding and encouraged collaboration between agencies to maximize resource utilization.

### **Mandate #8: Data Benchmarking and Analysis:**

- Dr. Petersen introduced Mandate 8, focusing on improving data collection and analysis to track agricultural progress and inform future planning.
- **Improved Data Collection**
  - Dr. Petersen emphasized the need for more frequent data collection, noting that USDA updates every five years are insufficient for timely decision-making. He suggested leveraging the UVI Eastern Caribbean Center to provide annual updates, a recommendation supported by Dr. Adamu, who highlighted the center's role in supporting data-driven decisions.
- **Pipeline Programs and Student Recruitment**
  - Ms. Meadows discussed the development of pipeline programs to encourage students to pursue agriculture careers. She proposed targeted early admission and dual enrollment programs for high-achieving high school students interested in agricultural studies.
  - Ms. Shanta Roberts noted that UVI already has an early admissions program, and Dr. Safiya George added that free tuition legislation includes provisions for pipeline programs, which could fund these initiatives. Ms. Meadows committed to collaborating with UVI to create a specific program for agricultural students.

- Dr. Adamu suggested further exploring dual enrollment programs between UVI and local high schools to strengthen the educational pipeline. Dr. Petersen supported this idea and proposed its inclusion in the council's recommendations.
- **Addressing Challenges**
  - Dr. Petersen outlined potential challenges, including securing program approvals, funding, and addressing the shortage of agriculture educators. Ms. Meadows noted that some approvals were already in place but acknowledged the need for additional formalization to advance pipeline initiatives.
  - Dr. Petersen also highlighted the need to ensure adequate resources for program implementation, suggesting a collaboration between UVI and government agencies to identify funding sources.

#### **VIII. Open Discussion**

Dr. Petersen provided updates on the following:

1. **Private-Public Partnership Initiative:** He shared that additional funding for the initiative was under consideration but faced hurdles with OMB approval. Dr. George noted that the governor had vetoed a proposed reallocation of funds from UVI's School of Agriculture, creating further advocacy opportunities.
2. **Legislative Advocacy:** Mr. Wickrema informed members that efforts were underway to secure legislative support for funding priorities. Dr. Petersen reiterated the importance of addressing funding gaps in the agriculture sector.
3. **Meeting Wrap-Up and Next Steps:** Dr. Petersen concluded the meeting by summarizing key takeaways and noting that all feedback would be incorporated into a final version of the reviewed mandates. He indicated that the proposed December 20th meeting might need to be rescheduled due to holiday schedules.

#### **IX. Adjournment**

There being no further business, the meeting was officially adjourned at 10:39 a.m.

#### **X. Next Meeting**

Members will receive an official email notification confirming the date and time of the next meeting.