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St. John residents get chance to learn about EDA programs

By SUZANNE CARLSON Daily News Staff
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St. Johnians had a chance to learn more about the Economic Development Authority's various programs at a Town Hall meeting Wednesday, and the team will give a final presentation tonight on St. Thomas.

Several residents had questions about the tax incentives given to select businesses that agree to abide by certain conditions, including charitable contributions, and whether the EDC keeps a list of nonprofits approved to receive such contributions.

"We've received a lot of inquiries similar to that," said Margarita Greenidge-Benjamin, managing director of the tax incentive program. "We're working through that process, because our clients also ask for that. So hopefully we'll have that sooner than later."

At the EDA's first Town Hall meeting on St. Croix on Tuesday, Charlita Shuster explained how her 37-year-old nonprofit dance organization, Music in Motion, did not survive after the hurricanes despite her pleas to Economic Development Commission beneficiary companies for financial help.

"We need a little bit more stability of knowing where these people are giving their donations to," Shuster said.

Resident Pam Gaffin questioned the involvement of Caneel Bay in the program, and asked how much money has been forgone in taxes over the years.

"Tax information is confidential," said Assistant Chief Executive Officer Wayne Biggs, but he said the EDA does periodically release aggregate figures.

Biggs also discussed the EDA's industrial parks on St. Croix and St. Thomas, and how successful companies like Leatherback Brewery have been expanding. That brewery is moving into Puerto Rico and has plans to create a microbrewery in Havensight on St. Thomas, "so they're expanding quickly," he said.

St. John also does not have an economic development zone like St. Croix and St. Thomas, which provide incentives for development in certain areas that are not otherwise available.

Nadine Marchena-Kean, managing director of the Enterprise Zone Commission, said that "right now, because it's the commercial zone, we're looking at the outline of the historic Cruz Bay area, but that does not limit suggestions coming in from the community.

EDA Chief Executive Officer Kamal Latham also highlighted the Vision 2040 program, funded through a \$1.6 million federal grant, which will create an economic development "vision and plan for the entire territory," with community input.

The final EDA Town Hall meeting is set for tonight on St. Thomas from 6 to 9 p.m. at the V.I. Small Business Development Training Center in Nisky Center.

For more information, visit www.usvieda.org.

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