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Let's establish a V.I. Office of Resiliency and Recycling for sustainable management of hurricane debris

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Debris litters Coki Point Beach on St. Thomas after hurricanes Irma and Maria. The Island Green Living Association is proposing that much of the refuse from the storms be recycled.

Daily News photo by BILL KISER

As the USVI begins to pick up the pieces from the ravages of hurricanes Irma and Maria, the not-for-profit Island Green Living Association urgently calls for the sustainable management of debris and waste associated with the hurricanes.

Additionally, it is our position that creating an Office of Resiliency & Recycling could expedite sustainable practices and redevelopment of the territory — not as it was, but as it should be.

Our landfills are currently at capacity and it is more critical than ever that we find sustainable solutions for handling our waste while the many tons of storm wreckage are removed. Now is the time to move as the Army Corps of Engineers and FEMA assist in setting up debris removal operations.

Let this be the impetus that jump-starts economical methods of separation to reduce costs and conserve precious island land going forward, long overdue in the territory, bringing something positive out of this crisis.

Sustainable waste management not only protects the territory, it is also the most cost-effective option in the long run and it creates jobs.

According to many, including Governor Mapp, if waste is separated properly, up to 50 to 70 percent can potentially be shipped off-island or recycled at little to no cost.

Additionally, large-scale composting operations to process organic waste (downed trees, etc.) will become a critical resource for restoring the islands by providing nutrient-rich humus, which will help redevelop soil. What isn't needed for public works can be donated to residents impacted by the hurricanes.

Materials like broken-up concrete and masonry can be used in the construction of retaining walls and building exterior cladding. It can also be ground up and used in roads. Glass can be pulverized (a process by which sharp edges are worn down) and screened into suitable size ranges to be used in walking paths, gardens, countertops, artwork, playgrounds and as filters for wastewater treatment systems.

It is vital for places like the USVI to rebuild in a fundamentally different way, so that we are stronger and better prepared for future natural disasters while being cleaner and more reliable.

For example, a recycling eco-park can be created on each island with a solar farm, where wood from fallen trees is chipped and made available for free to island residents, old appliances can be collected and either repaired or shipped off-island for recycling, baling machines will process cardboard and other recyclables so they can be sold, community composting facilities will be available, etc.

According to Judith Enck, the former EPA administrator for Region 2, which includes the U.S. Virgin Islands: "The islands are dealing with a huge amount of hurricane debris, most of it clean wood. It is imperative that the wood be chipped and composted or used as wood chips rather than burned/incinerated even with an air curtain. Burning wood on a hot and humid island will only make respiratory diseases worse, especially at a time when indoor mold is taxing people's respiratory systems. Reuse, recycling, composting and a giant shift toward renewable energy such as solar and wind will make the USVI more environmentally sustainable than it was before these tragic hurricanes."

Michael Bloomberg, in his book "Climate of Hope," says "Cities and nations thrive when leaders anticipate the future — and dream big." Governor Mapp in a statement on Tuesday said, "We are not going to recover for speed's sake — we want to make sure our recovery is filled with quality, that we're building resilience ... because hurricanes are going to be part of our lives. They are going to be coming more often and they are going to be more ferocious."

Let's embrace this direction and incorporate concepts from 100 Resilient Cities, pioneered by the Rockefeller Foundation and dedicated to helping regions around the world become more resilient to the physical, social and economic challenges that are growing in the 21st century.

We have experts in the territory. Setting up of an Office of Resiliency & Recycling, reporting directly to the governor and working on a volunteer basis, could expedite redevelopment of the islands while ensuring sustainability is integrated at every level including new building codes/standards, underground utility distribution, expanded sustainable energy production such as wind and solar in addition to territory-wide recycling and composting, even working with suppliers to switch to eco-conscious shipping/packing materials.

The office would also liaise with other agencies, such as the Education Department, to ensure sustainability curriculum is embedded within the education system.

This is our opportunity to lay the groundwork to shore up our biggest industry — tourism — by becoming an authentic eco-tourism destination that visitors will embrace.

Governor Mapp has done a fantastic job of engaging iconic leaders such as Bloomberg, Tim Duncan, Kenny Chesney, many governors, NGO and private sector business in humanitarian efforts. As we head for recovery, the Office of Resiliency & Recycling could help connect the dots and become a model benefiting others as well, such as Puerto Rico and the BVI.

We need to work as a team and rebuild in a resilient manner. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, we can be better than before.

— Harith Wickrema of St. John was among the recipients of EPA's Environmental Champion Award and is president of Island Green Living Association, a 501 (c) 3, not-for-profit organization dedicated to sustainability on St. John and throughout the USVI. He also serves as board chairman of V.I. Waste Management Authority and spearheads the Governor's Recycling Taskforce, all on a volunteer basis.