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St. Croix Community Questions Unused Material at Local School Amid Repair Struggles

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Federally-purchased lumber under the care of VIHFA lumber, which had been placed at the back of the Sunshine Mall in Frederiksted, was relocated to the abandoned Alexander Henderson Elementary School. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

St. Croix residents, in a meeting last Wednesday with Government House officials, voiced their frustrations over unused wood piled at Alexander Henderson Elementary School since 2018. The material, which many locals expressed a desire to use for repairing hurricane-damaged homes, has been left untouched due to federal restrictions. During the meeting, more than one person spoke about the difficulties Virgin Islanders are facing in accessing funding and/or materials in order to make repairs to homes damaged in the 2017 hurricane season.

One resident pointed out the stacks of wood at the derelict school facility, which was deemed inoperable after Hurricane Maria. “They have not been utilized by anybody,” said Phillipa Smith-Tyler. “A number of residents expressed a desire to have the wood so they could fix up their properties damaged by the hurricane.”

However, as Governor Albert Bryan explained, the territorial government could not make the decision to give the material away.

The previous administration had plans to undertake a re-roofing project at the facility, and thus the large quantity of wood was brought in. However, “FEMA rejected the envisioned roofing program, and we had to move it to HUD CDBG,” Governor Bryan said. That material, he continued, “is federal property and was actually bought with federal money.” That means that “we cannot dispose of the wood because then we would have to pay back the federal government.” He noted that the material was moved to the school site after being stored in a location that accrued rental fees. The V.I. Housing Finance Authority is the steward of that wood, Governor Bryan noted.

Ultimately, FEMA approved a complete replacement for Alexander Henderson Elementary, the governor’s Chief of Staff Karl Knight explained.

Ms. Smith-Tyler also referenced the Good Hope School, which is in a state of blight, but for which remediation has been hindered due to a dispute amongst the institution’s governing board. Governor Bryan said that there had been discussions to takeover the property from the board.

“It’s a good property, we could use it for training and other purposes,” he said, noting that the government was in initial negotiations with the board with a view to effecting the takeover. Mr. Knight argued that the Good Hope School is one of the properties that would benefit from the proposed program to handle abandoned and derelict buildings.