

# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## Education Officials Upbeat About Construction of New Schools, But Challenges With Logistics, Potential Funding Changes Loom Ahead

Crime / **Published On October 04, 2023 05:52 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **October 04, 2023**



**Design rendering of new Lockhart Elementary School Photo Credit: Screenshot taken from School Advisory Board Meeting. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM**

In a Schools Advisory Board Meeting on Tuesday afternoon, education officials were upbeat about plans for new school construction in the territory. The meeting comes as parents, teachers and students on St. Croix have expressed frustration with the state of current learning facilities, which the Dept. of Education has been scrambling to address within 30 days.

“We’re here to get us all excited again to start planning and looking at the various designs that have been prepared,” Education Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington told meeting attendees. Noting that plans have been scaled down from what was initially conceptualized, Wells-Hedrington argued that things have worked out for the best. “One of the benefits of this smaller footprint is instead of having a bare-bones, basic ten schools you can have eight schools that have everything that the students need...so you could really consolidate and save on some of your operational problems.”

Representatives of the DLR Group, a design firm based in Nebraska, addressed the meeting to discuss the considerations given to each school to ensure it is unique to the local community. Sharing slides featuring rendered images of the proposed new design, Associate Designer Peyton Nolan explained that guiding principles for the project are centered around the whole child, technology, health, safety and security, as well as culture and resilience, audience members were told. The new facilities will be designed with enough photovoltaic generation capacity to power themselves “for two reasons: WAPA and WAPA,” Ms. Nolan said. The “thermal comfort” of the buildings’ occupants was also a primary consideration, she explained.

Consultations have been held and research conducted with roughly 7,000 students and 700 teachers across the territory on how the design of the new schools can create a more engaging environment among learners and educators alike, officials said.

An audience member inquired about the department's long-term strategy for upholding the standards of these modern schools. In reply, officials shared their plan to seek a multi-year extended warranty from the contractor, as opposed to the typical one-year warranty. The aim is to determine a baseline for yearly operational costs during this extended period. This will facilitate the allocation of a suitable budget for regular maintenance and necessary repairs.

Additionally, the buildings are intended to be designed in such a way that standardized components will be used across the life of the construction project. That way, the Department of Education will be able to maintain an inventory of parts, items and materials that can be used in multiple school plants, making repairs easier since specialized components will not have to be sought or ordered for each repair that becomes necessary.

Education officials noted that the work ahead would be a daunting challenge. Concerns were raised about the ability of those working on the project to complete construction of the schools in a timely manner. Money is being approved by the Federal Emergency Management Agency for fixed cost offers, meaning that the construction process would be a race against inflation. Too long of a delay, and the allocated funds will no longer be sufficient to complete the construction as designed. The ability of the department to manage learning in the least disruptive manner while construction is ongoing is also anticipated to provide a logistical challenge, as students may need to be moved around to prevent interruptions in instructional time.

Officials promised to meet on a quarterly basis to ensure that stakeholders are kept informed about the progress of the department's several major construction projects.