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Senators Call For Immediate Water Testing In STT-STJ District, But Officials Offer No Timeframe

Uncertainty in Water Infrastructure: St. Thomas's Aged Pipes Spark Health Concerns; WAPA Lacks Cost Estimates

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Noel Hodge, WAPA's director of water distribution. **By. V.I. LEGISLATURE**

Anxiety caused by the discovery of heavy metal contamination in some areas of St. Croix's potable water system prompted several legislators on Friday to urge the V.I. Water and Power Authority to turn their attention to the St. Thomas-St. John district, over fears that residents on those islands may be facing the same issue. But officials with several government arms either pointed to FEMA or said the territory currently does not have the supplies necessary to take on St. Thomas.

Senator Ray Fonseca, who traveled to St. Croix for the Committee of the Whole hearing on the water crisis Friday, wondered whether existing water lines in his district were just as old as those currently posing challenges on St Croix. Noel Hodge, WAPA's director of water distribution, explained that several pipes on St. Thomas were installed in the 1960s and 1970s, and have therefore exceeded their service life. Noting similarities with the infrastructure in both districts, Mr. Fonseca remarked, "I figured that it might be the same lead and copper [present]."

According to Mr. Hodge, the decision to conduct similar testing in the St. Thomas-St. John district would be based heavily on data, and would generally lie in the hands of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Data, said WAPA CEO Andrew Smith, is what convinced FEMA to allocate some \$1.2 billion for the prudent replacement of St. Croix's entire public water infrastructure. "We focused on St. Croix because it was critical," clarified Mr. Smith. Don Gregoire, WAPA's director of water service also told legislators that "we've been channelling all the monies to St. Croix because we know our infrastructure in St. Croix is worse off than St. Thomas."

With all the focus on St. Croix, WAPA was unable to inform legislators of the associated cost of replacing the piping infrastructure on St. Thomas. Mr. Fonseca urged WAPA officials to "get this assessment done on St. Thomas and find out what it's going to cost," once the emergency on St. Croix has abated.

Senator Marvin Blyden, also a lawmaker from the St. Thomas-St. John district, expressed concern over the possibility that St. Thomas's water potable could be contaminated. "The point is they need to be testing in both districts because a life is priceless," he argued. "Forget FEMA. I recommend that you guys do a territory-wide assessment."

Throughout the six-hour session, legislators continued to worry over the lack of information regarding water quality in the St. Thomas-St. John district. STT-STJ lawmaker Senator Milton Potter inquired whether "what we're witnessing on St. Croix could be a bellwether of a more comprehensive, complex problem that is territory-wide and not necessarily isolated to St. Croix." Mr. Potter asked the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources whether "more comprehensive testing throughout the territory [would] be a prudent move for us to make at this time."

DPNR Commissioner Jean Pierre Oriol answered affirmatively and announced, "It is our goal. Because of what has taken place here, we want to make sure that we include St. Thomas in future testing that we do."

Mr. Oriol, however, was not able to provide Senator Carla Joseph, who also represents STT-STJ, with an estimated timeline for when testing on St. Thomas would begin. Instead, he told the senator that DPNR was preparing to order supplies for additional testing. That proved unsatisfactory to Ms. Joseph. "How is it [that] you're always so arbitrary about your timeframe? This is an issue. Everybody is very vague with giving timeframes. You should have that as your target," the lawmaker complained.

Her admonition prompted Mr. Oriole to explain that supplies should be in the territory within the next month. "Right now we have enough testing supplies to execute over the 48-hour period in the St. Croix district. We do not have the kits available to extend over to St. Thomas," he responded.