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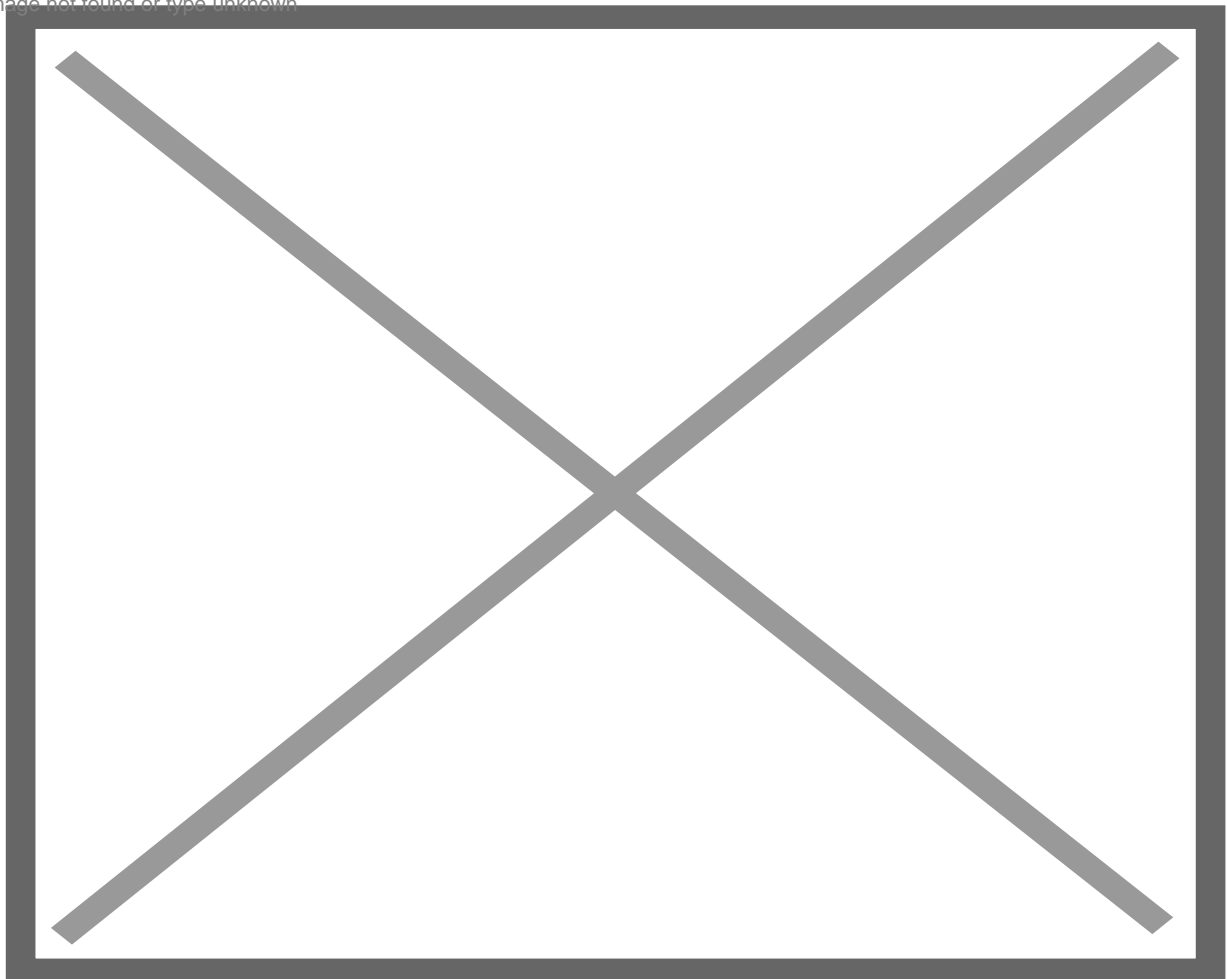
Lawmakers Approve \$350,000 For Water Distribution On St. Croix, Clean Up Budget Errors

Senator Francis Advocates for Cost Relief with Water Distribution Bill

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Members of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance voted on Tuesday to approve Bill 35-0190, which provides \$350,000 in funding to distribute bottled water to residents in areas most affected by recently discovered heavy metal contamination.

Bill sponsor Senator Novelle Francis told his colleagues that despite the price freeze on water and related products currently in effect, “the average cost of the water being sold right now is...between \$5 and sometimes even \$10...imagine carrying the cost week after week and month after month with no relief.”

The proposed legislation, he said, was “an interim measure in an evolving situation.”

With the Department of Health initially tapped to lead the initiative, Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said that providing bottled water to affected residents “plays a vital step to protect public health, demonstrates government accountability, and ensures equitable treatment to every community member.”

V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency Assistant Director Steven DeBlasio Sr. said that work on figuring out how to get the water to residents is already underway. “The first option would be to create a voucher system that allows us to immediately distribute voucher or coupon booklets,” he said. That way, Mr. DeBlasio said, each of the 3,400 account-holders identified by the Water and Power Authority could “utilize the coupons to purchase water in the size and bottles most appropriate for their individual household use.” The cost of printing these vouchers, he told Senator Dwayne DeGraff in response to an inquiry, would be between \$6000 and \$7000.

The second option presented to lawmakers was for residents to be given gift cards or debit cards instead of coupons, and the third alternative would be to “physically distribute water at predetermined points of distribution,” Mr. DeBlasio noted. He told lawmakers that VITEMA supported the voucher option as the “most equitable and the most expedient solution” until filters being procured by WAPA arrive on island and are distributed.

Mr. DeGraff suggested rolling out all three methods simultaneously, in an effort to reach as many of the approximately 8000 people in the communities identified by WAPA. He also suggested engaging the support of the National Guard, both for their desalination capabilities and their ability to help with water distribution. Mr. DeBlasio said that the Guard’s assistance would be solicited for physical distribution of water, should that be embarked upon.

Committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory expressed some frustration at what she saw as impediments in getting clean drinking water to residents. Responding to her queries regarding the bureaucracy and time involved in setting up a voucher system, Mr. DeBlasio explained that the relevant systems were already in place at the Department of Property and Procurement. “They do it for fuel on St. Croix,” he said, assuring that coupons could be available to distribute to residents in as little as a week. To Ms. Frett-Gregory’s concerns about procedural delays on the legislative side, Office of Management and Budget Director Jenifer O’Neal noted that under the current state of emergency declared by Governor Albert Bryan Jr., “he can direct immediate resources to fund the water, knowing we can always bring it back.” That way, the immediate needs of St. Croix residents can be met “as this body works through the committee effort,” Ms. O’Neal reassured.

Ms. O’Neal also welcomed a proposed amendment from Mr. Francis, who said that the appropriation would come from the general fund, rather than the St. Croix Capital Improvement Fund, as currently drafted. “As this is not a capital expense, the St. Croix Capital Improvement Fund is not the appropriate funding source,” she noted.

Another amendment places VITEMA, rather than the Department of Health, the lead agency on the initiative.

Committee members also used the measure to make adjustments to the current budget. According to the chair, there were a number of errors to be corrected, including language in the VI Fire and Emergency Medical Services bill. Additionally, “there was some transposition of numbers that needed to be cleaned up and then we missed three nonprofits,” said Ms. Frett-Gregory. An inadvertent double-count of salary increases for University of the Virgin Islands employees also needed to be addressed.

Once those issues are addressed, appropriations from the general fund for fiscal year 2024 would now stand at “\$727,578,956 plus the \$350,000 that we are considering today,” Ms. Frett-Gregory said.

All committee members present voted in favor of the bill.

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