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With the Time-Sensitive Nature of FEMA Funding, Dept. of Education Says It's Pushing to Complete New Schools on Time

Dept. of Education Outlines 10-Year Vision for Modernized School Buildings

Education / **Published On November 08, 2023 07:58 AM /**

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Rendering of the new Charlotte Amalie High School By. THE V.I. DEPT. OF EDUCATION

In a recent Senate Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure & Planning hearing, the Department of Education's plans to smoothly transition students during the revamp of Charlotte Amalie High School were closely examined.

D.O.E. has unveiled detailed designs for the modernization of Charlotte Amalie High School on St. Thomas, as well as St. Croix Central High School. According to Commissioner Dion Wells-Hedrington, the reconstruction of the St. Croix Central High will proceed straightforwardly by relocating campus facilities.

“You will see with Central High’s design, we’re flipping the campus. So the campus is actually going to be constructed where the modulars are on the opposite side,” she elaborated. Plans are to demolish the existing gym and begin construction on that site. Once academic buildings are completed, students will be transitioned before the original buildings are flattened.

The Education Department's architect, Chaneel Callwood-Daniels, explained to lawmakers that the renovation of Charlotte Amalie High School would occur in phases, with separate contractors for demolition and construction, and a careful consideration of historical preservation.

Work to remove lead and asbestos, she told lawmakers, was 90 percent complete. The architect explained that in the first stages, three buildings will be fenced off and demolished, paving the way for the reconstruction of academic buildings. Subsequently, students currently housed in modulars and buildings on the periphery of the site will move into the new fenced buildings, and work will then commence on structures outside of the fenced-off area.

Committee members expressed concerns about potential disruptions to students. Senator Dwayne DeGraff inquired about the impact of noise, while Ms. Callwood-Daniels emphasized the contractor's commitment to minimize disturbances. “Some of it will involve working early in the mornings, or in the evenings. He has not given us his plan yet,” she told Senator DeGraff. Considerations will also be taken to reduce dust, as the contractor will “wet everything down before he knocks down pieces.”

Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger questioned the projected timelines for completion, citing past delays and abandoned projects.

Dismissing the senator's concerns, Ms. Callwood-Daniels said “people who know me know that I’m driven by time.” She anticipates a 10-year timeline for completion of most of all the learning institutions scheduled for rehabilitative work, but Ms. Francis-Heyliger continued to express doubts about the feasibility of that timeline.

Still, Ms. Callwood-Daniels reassured Sen. Heyliger that by 2033, “you’re gonna see a lot of new schools.” She reminded lawmakers that “time is not on our side,” referencing the fixed nature of FEMA’s grants. “The longer you take to do a project, the costs keep going up, so that alone is driving us to complete things in a timely fashion,” Callwood-Daniels noted. The Education Department is looking to get as many projects as possible online simultaneously, she said.