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Senate Approves \$5.1M for Delayed Paul E. Joseph Stadium, Completion Now Expected Late 2024

Latest Completion Timeline of Q4 2024 Uncertain Due to Global Construction Challenges, Testifiers Say

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Construction at the Paul E. Joseph Stadium in Frederiksted as of Nov. 2024. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Continued construction work of the Paul E. Joseph stadium is now funded to the tune of \$5.1 million, following this week's vote by lawmakers on the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance in favor of Bill 35-0180.

The draft legislation, requested by Governor Albert Bryan Jr., will contain an amendment to appropriate the funds from the Communities Facilities Trust Fund instead of the Internal Revenue

Matching fund. The switch, said Senate President Novelle Francis, who presented the bill, is to ensure that the project moves forward in a timely manner. The measure also comes with the stipulation that the Department of Public Works submit regular status reports to the Legislature. This requirement is not new, however, as lawmakers have been receiving progress reports since 2020, with the last one submitted in July, Mr. Francis noted.

Tawana Nicholas, DPW's chief engineer, serves as the project management for the Paul E. Joseph Stadium rebuild. She testified that recently completed work includes the plastering and painting of the stairway towers, as well as the left and right field exterior walls. "Plastering the entryway pavilion, the construction of the floor slab for the upper concourse level and the walls for the upper concourse restrooms are complete," Ms. Nicholas told lawmakers. Left field bleachers have also been completed, as is work on the ground floor interior walls, and electrical and plumbing work for restrooms and locker rooms. Work is currently being performed on the right field bleachers and outfield lights. "Our project team continues to have regular meetings with the contract and all stakeholders regarding the progress of the Paul E. Joseph stadium to ensure all deliverables are met and the finished stadium meets all identified needs," Ms. Nicholas told lawmakers.

With the project having already spent \$23.6 million of the initial \$27.3 million appropriated, Ms. Nicholas says the additional \$5 million will be to cover the cost of "add ons and further improvements to the project site," including a press box and announcer's booth, as well as purchasing a generator for the site and swapping out lighting in the parking lot for solar-powered equipment. The project is currently scheduled for completion in the last quarter of 2024, but Ms. Nicholas warned lawmakers that this timeline could change "once orders are placed for long lead and fabricated items," noting that there are still supply chain and logistical challenges being experienced in the global construction industry.

In response to a question from Senator Marvin Blyden about the [timeliness of the work](#) being done by the contractor, DPW Commissioner Derek Gabriel said that "Any project of this magnitude brings with it inherent problems," which they have been working through. One major factor in the delayed completion of the stadium had to do with the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) (FEMA), "which caused a delay that was over a year," Mr. Gabriel disclosed. "That has really set us back significantly, and we've been trying to catch up." The contractor, GEC, Mr. Gabriel says, has been very responsive, and "always been willing to come to the table to find creative solutions to overcome them."

Commissioner of the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation (DPSR) Calvert White told lawmakers that the stadium, when completed, will not only be used for baseball. "We have a unique opportunity to maybe use the facility to host concerts," he noted. Additionally, the size of the facility will lend itself to sports other than baseball, Mr. White told lawmakers, as well as other events – including hosting the Crucian Christmas Festival Village. However that, Ms. Nicholas disclosed, would cost approximately \$3 million in additional funds, not included in the \$5.1 million allocation under discussion on Thursday. Because some additional planning and design work would be needed for the booths and permanent stage, Ms. Nicholas said that the focus for now is on completing the main stadium project, after which the Department of Tourism and the Department of Public Works will collaborate on the additional work required for the festival village.

Mr. Gabriel told lawmakers that stakeholders would be ready to come to the Legislature with a solution for the additional work some time in the first quarter of 2024.

Senator Dwayne DeGraff, however, was skeptical about the additional plans. Noting that he did not support the original plans for construction, the senator said he was willing to vote for the additional \$5.1 million to ensure that the main stadium project is successfully completed. “But it will never be another yes for no extra \$3 million,” he warned, saying that the Christmas Festival Village plans “should have been factored in a long time ago.”

Asking about the return on investment for the facility that, by all estimations, will cost upwards of \$35 million altogether, committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory wondered whether DSPR had any firm commitments from national sports teams to host training camps and other events at the stadium when completed. Mr. White said that while people were expressing verbal interest, it was difficult to secure firm commitments since the timelines on the project were so fluid. “I think that’s our challenge right now. Having people to say that they’re going to come not knowing the exact timeline when the facility will be finished.”

Senator Novelle Francis called this level of uncertainty “an embarrassment,” and tied it into not having faith in the contractor. “Here it is that we lacked the confidence to believe that they will be able to complete this project in a timely fashion,” he said. “There’s no way that we could wait for it to be built for us to start the conversation,” he argued, using the example of the Port Authority and the West Indian Company negotiating now for the 2026 and 2027 cruise season. “They ain’t waiting for the place to be dredged, they ain’t waiting for Crown Bay to be built.”

He then knocked GEC for not having a representative at the Senate hearing. “That’s the level of respect, after we spend \$32 million on this project that GEC could be out of the country, and they don’t have a representative here today...it’s unacceptable...GEC cannot continue to hold us hostage to this project,” he declared.

However, Mr. White argued that caution was prudent, noting that thousands of dollars had been lost just this summer when teams who had booked to come to the Virgin Islands were not able to do so because their accommodation was not available despite the hotel promising to be ready by a particular date. “That’s what I’m trying to portray, that event organizations want to be clear that when they make that investment, that they’re coming to a finished product,” he said.

Continuing his defense of the contractor and the current work that is taking place, Mr. Gabriel told lawmakers, “I think everybody sitting in the chambers would agree that we’ve seen progress on this project in the last 12 months that we haven’t seen in the last five years...the contractor squarely understands the importance of this project and delivering the project on time and on schedule.” He assured lawmakers that DPW would pursue “liquidated damages” against the contractor should they fail to deliver on time.

Ultimately, lawmakers approved the additional funds for the project, which as Mr. Gabriel noted has been ongoing for three successive administrations. However, “I am confident that this administration under the leadership of Mr. Gabriel will be the one that cut the ribbon to Paul E. Joseph stadium,” he told lawmakers.