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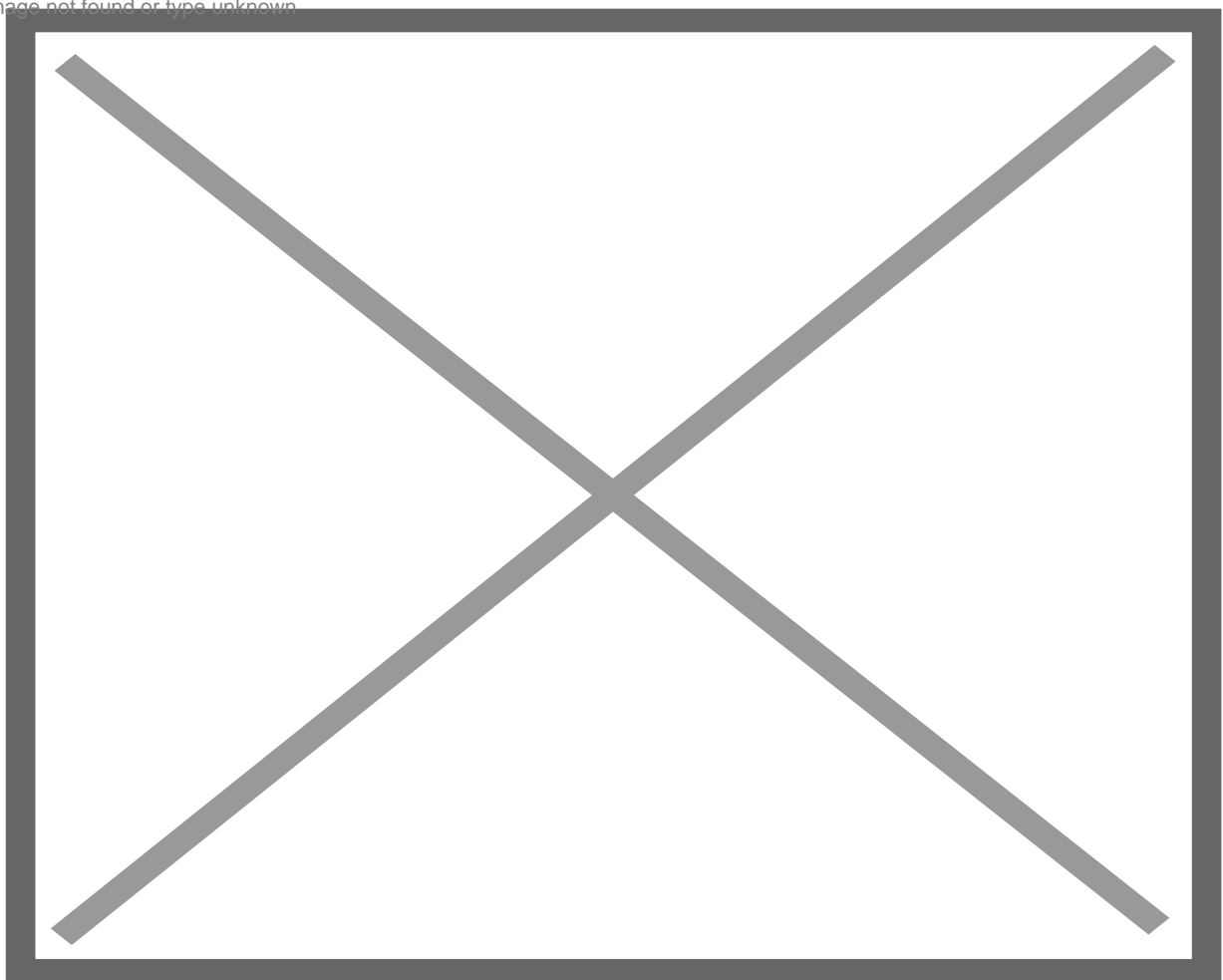
Inefficiency, Bureaucracy, Inflexibility Around Local and Federal Funding Holding Back Progress, CTE Officials Argue

Difficulties in repairing hurricane-damaged classrooms due to FEMA red tape

Federal / **Published On November 16, 2023 05:31 AM /**

Janeka Simon **November 16, 2023**

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Local and federal funding challenges are frustrating progress on key work and initiatives. During Wednesday's meeting of the VI Board of Career and Technical Education, several officials got the opportunity to vent about how excessive bureaucracy and inflexible policies are causing challenges.

On the operational side, Executive Director Anton Doos told the board that while CTE had been given the ability to prioritize some outstanding payments for bills generated in the previous fiscal

year, “there’s really not much to be meeting about until our finances open up. They have not released the finances yet.” That prompted board member Genevieve Whitaker to call for CTE to “remain vigilant when it comes to the Department of Finance,” recommending that a documented communication trail be established outlining what the challenges are in disbursing the funds, given that it is “well after the start of the fiscal year.”

Ms. Whitaker hoped that these challenges were not indicative of “a larger issue” with the Department, but other members confirmed that other agencies were also experiencing delays in receiving their appropriations.

“The government does not treat itself as a business,” declared Mr. Doos. “If it would, these kinds of things would not happen. It’s either you have a fiscal year that opens on a date, or you have a fiscal year that just opens whenever, and that’s a problem.” He argued that the CTE board, as a semi-autonomous agency, should by rights receive a lump sum allocation disbursed quarterly. “But as it is right now, our funds are going into the ERP and the ERP becomes our auditor,” he said, complaining that the money then becomes tied up in cumbersome bureaucracy. The slow pace of disbursement is an annual phenomenon, Mr. Doos noted, “every year between October and the first of the year, that’s unfortunately the way things are.”

Apart from issues with local funding, frustrations were also expressed about delays and hiccups in repairing deteriorating, hurricane-damaged classrooms with money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

“They put us in a Catch-22,” complained Sana Joseph-Smith, the governor’s policy advisor on workforce development and education. “A lot of our challenges have been the red tape with FEMA,” she continued, arguing that federal intractability works to “undermine who we are as a community.” Much of the territory’s school infrastructure is suffering from twin ailments, she explained. “You have hurricanes and you have years of neglect, and now you have a combination that we’re all trying to dig out of.”

Victor Somme III, the Department of Education’s deputy superintendent for St. Croix, agreed with Ms. Joseph-Smith with respect to differing priorities between FEMA and local governments. “FEMA’s main intent is to restore what is, they’re not big on improvements. They just want to get you back to where you were, not to improve your position pre-storm.”

Asked for a timeframe for restoring the territory’s classrooms, CTE and otherwise, Ms. Joseph-Smith was blunt. “There isn’t a timeframe. I wish I could promise you something that isn’t there,” she said, noting that each project is proceeding along a different schedule. She characterized the process as walking along a “very thin line” in terms of balancing construction needs with the safety and comfort of students and education workers.

“I gotta be frank and honest, that means it’s not going to be pretty, that means that somethings it’s going to be patchwork,” she warned. However, Ms. Joseph-Smith warned that the temporary upheaval was for the best. “We cannot miss the opportunity of having brand new schools built because we need those,” she argued.

CTE Board Chair Joane Murphy noted with relief that there was a “limited amount of money” available for repairs as part of a recently-awarded grant. “That is a blessing,” she remarked. However, the available funds pale in comparison to the magnitude of the work that is required. Mr. Somme noted that it would take millions of dollars to replace the leaky copper piping in the St. Croix Technical and Career Education Center (C-Tech) roofing system. Ms. Murphy added that it was not just the piping, but the entire C-Tech roof that needed to be replaced. “And 10 years

ago, it was going to cost \$3 million to replace that roof,” she noted, wondering what the current cost of such a project could be. “Probably triple that amount,” Mr. Somme speculated.

Ms. Murphy promised that the board would play its part in the repair effort by attempting to “identify specific problems for various buildings for CTE classrooms, and see how we can somehow help to facilitate some of these repairs.”

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