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Contractor Disputes and WMA Confusion Stall Christiansted Road Repairs, Businesses Suffer

Businesses face hardships amidst stalled road repairs

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Roadwork in Christiansted being performed by Marco Trucking. The slow pace in repairs has dampened Christiansted business activity while the contractor and the Waste Management Authority dispute over payments. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

“The roads need to be fixed as soon as possible. It should have been done a long time ago.” That was how Samuel Sanes, St. Croix Administrator, set the tone at the beginning of a recent meeting at Government House with those who live and own businesses in the town of Christiansted, to discuss the abysmal state of the roads.

The current conditions are “a terrible hazard not just for cars, but also for pedestrians,” Mr. Sanes admitted, turning to Ronald Phillips, Waste Management Authority engineer, for context.

Mr. Phillips explained that WMA was replacing the town’s approximately 60-year-old sewer lines with up to 32,000 linear feet of new pipe, under all the streets in Christiansted – except for Company Street, where the lines had been replaced in 2016. The 2-year project, which was begun in July 2022, has long been mired in controversy due to the manner in which it is being carried out.

At the meeting, contractor Sean Baptiste of Marco St. Croix blamed issues on the failure of the Waste Management Authority to keep up with its accounts payables. He described how, while still being owed millions for garbage haulage, he began the pipeline projects and worked for months without receiving the fees normally due when a contract is initialized.

WMA Chief Financial Officer Daryl Griffith argued that all invoices for Mr. Baptiste’s company were currently up to date, a fact that Mr. Baptiste is reportedly disputing. On the latest “Comes With The Territory” episode, aired on Sundays on WTJX, Mr. Sanes said that after a series of meetings with both Mr. Baptiste and WMA officials, it was agreed that a thorough review of all paperwork for the current project would be undertaken. As for the millions Mr. Baptiste says he is owed for previous work, “he has every right to bring it up. But it should not interfere with the current project,” Mr. Sanes said.

At last week’s meeting however, the residents and small business owners of Christiansted were not interested in the internal squabbling between agency and contractor. “Is there a plan?” asked a second business owner. “I just feel like there needs to be a little extra happening,” she continued, pleading for signage, enhanced street sweeping, or other interventions that could help mitigate the disruption. Many attendees expressed appreciation for the work being done, but concurred that a serious communication gap between contractor, WMA and the public existed.

With no estimated deadline for completion of the works, no communicated plan to guide residents as to which roads are closed for repairs and when, meeting participants said they felt lost in the chaos and confusion. With the holiday season looming, retailers were anxious about the ongoing slump in sales. “When you can't afford to pay your employees, you're forced to be more critical than you have been in the past,” business owner Matthew Ridgeway told Comes With the Territory host Leslie Commissiong on Sunday. “And right now, it looks like there's a lot of blame and enough for everybody to go around.”

Apart from the damper being placed on retail businesses by the chaos of Christiansted roads, residents say they are being affected by the callous and insensitive way workers are going about their daily tasks. Cindy Clearwater, who works from her home on East Street, said that she had to contend with empty water bottles, pieces of piping and other trash being left behind in the street and in her yard when the work in her area was completed. “The disrespect we as residents are getting is unacceptable. It’s infuriating,” she charged. Even while the work on her street was still going on, Ms. Clearwater said that she was often uninformed, recounting one incident where she opened her front door to find she had been blocked into her house by a backhoe. She and others contended that the radio broadcasts being employed by WMA were ineffective, and demanded more proactive communication and planning from the agency.

In response to pleas from residents for temporary solutions to yawning potholes and clouds of dust caused by unsealed roadways, Mr. Baptiste was adamant that the WMA would have to pay up so that his company did not have to bear any more upfront costs. “Once [they] give me a check in

three weeks, the roads will be done by Christmas,” he promised.

However, Mr. Ridgeway held WMA responsible for the current conditions. He contrasted this sewer line replacement project with previous work done by the Water and Power Authority. “It’s not every day that I get to hold WAPA up as a shining example,” he joked to Ms. Commissioning on Sunday. “But when [they] put the power underground in Christiansted, the contractor moved street by street, they completed the work, they came back in, they paved, and the interruption to business was, in comparison, quite minor.” WMA still has not been able to adequately explain why their project is not proceeding similarly, Mr. Ridgeway argued.

Mr. Sanes on Sunday committed to ensuring that at least those streets that will be heavily used for Christmas festivities will be fixed by the end of this month. However, Mr. Ridgeway says that the Christiansted Retail & Restaurant Association (CRRA) is now going to seek the assistance of the court in ensuring that the roads and sidewalks of Christiansted are in walkable and motorable condition.

“It’s not the role of CRRA to mediate a contract dispute between Waste Management and Marco,” he declared. Noting the financial impact suffered by businesses due to the lack of consumer traffic and the danger to public safety caused by current road conditions, he announced the CRRA’s intention to file an injunction against the Department of Public Works, WMA, and Marco. “We are not going to negotiate for you...we are here to put every ounce of pressure and every bit of leverage that we have for you guys to do your job.”