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\$825,000 School AC Project Under Fire for Alleged Overpriced Repairs and Extended Timelines

Senator Gittens demands answers for staggering costs in school AC replacement project

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The sign at St. Croix Educational Complex High School announces the awarding of an \$824,900 disaster recovery project for A/C unit repair and replacement to Custom Builders.

One lawmaker has raised concerns over the costs reportedly associated with some school rehabilitation projects. During a wide-ranging discussion before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, Senator Kenneth Gittens grilled education officials on “accountability with our monies.”

“While I have fairly good confidence in the leadership of the Education Department, I don't have the same confidence with our contractors,” declared Senator Gittens on Monday. [Student protests](#) that took place in the previous school term prompted him to “look into a couple of things,” the senator disclosed, saying that his findings concerned him. His investigations led him to question the commissioner of education and her team on ongoing work being carried out by Custom Builders VI.

Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedringtom confirmed that the company had been contracted to install air conditioning at the St. Croix Educational Complex High School and also to complete rehabilitation work at the Gladys A Abraham Elementary School on St. Thomas. Acting Chief Operations Office Alan Fleming told Mr. Gittens that work at the St. Croix Educational Complex was “substantially completed” and in the “closeout process”, but the lawmaker was more interested in discussing how much was being charged for the work done.

“For the removal and replacement of an existing 36-inch door, we're paying in excess of \$4,000,” Mr. Gittens declared, asking education officials “why is this?” He also queried why removing and replacing a ceiling fan reportedly cost \$18,000.

The senator informed Education officials that he had visited a local home improvement store where he observed doors for sale for less than a quarter of the aforementioned. However, Mr. Fleming told Sen. Gittens that “we're looking at a difference between residential doors and commercial doors and hardware.” He explained that the process of replacing a commercial door is more complicated, as the required parts are “not something that you could get off the shelf.” “That's some of the reasons why these products are expensive,” he said.

According to the Department of Property and Procurement's website, the total value of the contract awarded to Custom Builders for the modernization and renovation of the Gladys Abraham Elementary School is almost [\\$4.87 million](#), while the repair and replacement of the air conditioning units at Complex is valued at just under [\\$825,000](#).

Despite the explanation from Mr. Fleming, Sen. Gittens maintained that “this is just totally ridiculous.” He picked apart the costs of troubleshooting air conditioning units, and subsequently replacement units, which he stated are upwards of \$40,000 for both activities. He also complained that projects like these “seemingly take too long.”

Mrs. Wells-Hedringtom, while admitting that “we have some issues with vendors being responsive,” promised to look into the lawmaker's concerns as she did not have the relevant information before her. Nonetheless, she was able to contact the relevant project engineer for the St. Croix Educational Complex project who indicated that they were currently awaiting a “30-ton air handler” to complete the required work.

According to the DPP's website, that contract was supposed to come to an end on March 16th, 2022. Mrs. Wells-Hedringtom shared that the new estimated date for completion is July 2024.