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Legislators Question DPNR's Handling of Library Rehabilitations

Senators Capehart and Gittens express concerns over the pace and priority of library updates

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DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol at a recent Senate hearing. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Even as a historic Christiansted library is [set to reopen](#) early next month, the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources has come under pressure for what lawmakers think is a too-slow rate of rehabilitation for several of the territory's libraries.

During a recent appearance before the 35th Legislature, DNPR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol provided updates on several library projects, many of which have been delayed due to various

issues. In the case of the Charles W. Turnbull Library, for which solicitations were opened in January 2022, “the lowest bid received exceeded the allocated budget by \$1 million, thus the solicitation was canceled,” Mr. Oriol informed lawmakers. Following a revised scope of works, and another low bid that was over budget, the project is finally on schedule for a September 2024 completion date.

The lowest bid for the Enid M. Baa Library also came in over budget after being obligated in September 2021. However, DPNR, much like in the case of Charles W. Turnbull Library, has secured “additional funding” for the project. With a notice to proceed issued on March 19th, a newly restored Enid M. Baa Public Library and Archives is expected to be ready to reopen in a year’s time. The DPNR commissioner also noted that for the Athalie Petersen Library, the department is currently “in the process of approving a change order from additional items not a part of the original scope of work.” That library should be completed in “early 2025,” Mr. Oriol estimated.

According to Senator Diane Capehart, “these projects are taking too long.” Insinuating that the department was not being completely transparent in their assessment, the St. Croix senator complained that “we keep hearing the same story over and over” and requested that DPNR “give us some real details.” She was unrestrained in her remarks, telling Mr. Oriol that “[there are] a lot of things that your department is behind on.”

Mr. Oriol disagreed with her sentiment however, taking umbrage to “the notion that somehow my department is behind on something.” Providing details of the obligation-to-construction process, he contended that, “I don’t understand how DPNR is behind on anything, when two libraries are completed [and] two of them are in construction.”

Senator Kenneth Gittens pushed back, agreeing with his fellow Crucian senator. He noted that libraries were “seemingly not on our top priority listing” despite their “crucial role in our society.” Asserting that libraries do not currently receive the rightful attention due to them, Mr. Gittens mused, “I am still considering legislation to remove libraries from under the Department of Planning and Natural Resources.”

He found it prudent to clarify, though, that the consideration “is not an indictment on you, commissioner.” Instead, he said he continues to believe that “libraries have no business under the DPNR.”

If and when the senator’s proposed switch will make it to the legislative floor, remains to be seen.