

Confusion Over Senate Meeting Schedule Stalls Harbor Dredging Funding Talks

Finance Commissioner Kevin McCurdy's absence, due to a misunderstanding about the meeting's cancellation, delays crucial discussions on Charlotte Amalie Harbor dredging

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WICO partner cruise ships dock at the Havensight Pier, seen above, which is located approximately 5-10 minutes by taxi from downtown Charlotte Amalie. Additionally, Royal Caribbean ships dock at the Crown Bay Pier. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

An important discussion on soft cost funding for the dredging of the Charlotte Amalie Harbor was struck from the agenda of Tuesday's meeting of the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance, after key members of the government finance team failed to attend the hearing.

Bill 35-0262 was an Act appropriating \$1,434,950 in Fiscal Year 2024 from the Community Facilities Trust Fund for the pre-construction soft cost funding to prepare the Charlotte Amalie Harbor for dredging. Invited were Finance Commissioner Kevin McCurdy, along with other senior government officials, none of whom were in attendance. Additionally, no correspondence seeking to be excused was received by the committee from any of the no-shows.

This prompted the Committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory to request the bill's removal from the agenda. "I am not inclined to proceed...absent of the representatives of the government that have to speak to whether the \$1,434,950 is in fact available to be expended from the Community Facilities Trust Fund." She asserted that she would not tolerate "the continuous disrespect of the executive branch in not showing up for these types of important matters."

The Committee recently appropriated \$17 million for the dredging of the harbor. Dredging the harbor is crucial to allow new, Oasis-class cruise ships to dock in St. Thomas. "I'm certain that we are in full support of this measure," said Ms. Frett-Gregory, but maintained that the discussion could not proceed without the requisite financial experts. Nonetheless, she underscored the importance of the harbor as a key economic driver to the entire territory.

Ms. Frett-Gregory apologized to Carlton Dowe, the executive director of the Virgin Islands Port Authority, who was joined by several of his colleagues in the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall. "We know that it's a major economic driver for the Virgin Islands," she said, referring to the Charlotte Amalie Harbor. Frustrated with the mounting delays, Mr. Dowe lamented that "every day that we delay this soft cost money, it's running days and months into us being able to do this dredging." He wanted to make the Committee abundantly clear on the impact of further delaying the hearings.

"Folks are calling and clamoring [about] why the dredging isn't starting. This here, today, will impact the start date." He called on all stakeholders to quickly regroup and "deal with this matter as soon as possible." In the absence of this funding, Mr. Dowe said VIPA has "already expended some monies toward this dredging project" that should be covered by the soft cost funding. Relevant permits are one such action item.

Kevin McCurdy would later account for his absence, informing Ms. Frett-Gregory that he was of the impression that the meeting was canceled.

His confusion, she explained, stemmed from unrelated communication sent to the Finance Committee's chair by Governor Albert Bryan. The missive sent by Mr. Bryan indicated that the Finance Team would not attend the second block of Tuesday's hearing, intended to provide a financial overview of the GVI. Instead, the team would focus on developing the mid-year financial review, due before the Legislature one month after the Revenue Estimating Conference. The anticipated date of that update is June 7th. Bill 35-0262 is expected to be discussed then.