

New School Maintenance Chief Named, But Lawmakers Wary of Reporting Structure

Lawmakers debate potential for "politicization" with governor-appointed director

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The recently established [Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance](#) now has an executive director to lead the agency's charge, but the individual's identity remains a mystery, and concerns have arisen among lawmakers as the director is [yet another governor-appointed role](#).

"I would err on the side of Government House making that announcement," said Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington, who testified before the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning on Monday. Instead, she revealed tangential details, including the June 17 start date for the unnamed male executive director. She also shared that while he is a Virgin Islander, he possesses no prior experience working within the territory.

The Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance is tasked with the upkeep of schools across the territory, shifting the responsibility from the Department of Education and allowing a greater focus on academic matters. The new executive director was appointed by the governor and will report to him. Come June 17, the yet-to-be-disclosed leader of the Bureau will work with the governor to appoint an assistant director of School Construction and an assistant director of maintenance.

Senator Marise James, however, was concerned about possible challenges to a “smooth transition.” “I want to make sure that we set boundaries,” she cautioned. As per Commissioner Wells-Hedrington, the Bureau’s executive director will have “oversight over the maintenance of all our facilities and any type of construction”, but VIDE’s architect Chaneel Callwood would serve as “owner’s rep”, overseeing projects and advocating on behalf of the department.

When the creation of the agency was first considered over a year ago, Mrs. Wells-Hedrington emphasized the need to clearly delineate roles and responsibilities so as to not leave any room for interpretation. Fourteen months on, the commissioner has now met with her new counterpart and assured that they have “already established good communication.” “He’s ready and I think that he will be embraced by the VIDE family, and he will successfully transition into this new role,” the commissioner said.

But while the education commissioner is seemingly excited about the arrival of the new executive director, several lawmakers shared some misgivings on the current setup between the Department of Education and the new Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance. Senator Franklin Johnson, for his part, suggested that VIDE review their organizational chart as it sounds like there are “cross duties” between the two entities.

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory quickly chimed in to clarify that “there shall be no cross-contamination of duties.” The Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance falls under the VIDE for budgetary purposes, meaning the maintenance duties currently handled by the department must be gradually transitioned over. “You don't just bring an executive director, drop them in and start to work,” she told her colleagues. “Let's not botch this up. I think this is something that we can get right.”

Still, Senator Kenneth Gittens disagreed with the organizational and reporting structure as established, and encouraged his colleagues to revisit the section that authorizes the executive director to report to the governor. “If we continue to politicize these things, this is where you're going to have subordinate individuals telling a commissioner ...I don't work for you, I work directly for the governor...This is going to create some confusion.”

According to the law, whose author is Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, the executive director must be "appointed by the Governor," and this person must be either "an architect or engineer licensed in the Virgin Islands; an individual with seven or more years' experience in construction, capital project management, or maintenance management."

Mr. Gittens's sentiments were not shared by the VIDE commissioner who repeatedly maintained that she looks forward to regular communication with the Bureau’s new executive director. Where organizational concerns lie, she reminded lawmakers that it “would not be the first time that we've brought stuff back to this body” if the enabling legislation for the Bureau – Act 8717 – is ultimately found to require amendment.

Attached to the creation of the Bureau is increased funding for school plant maintenance, something that Mrs. Wells-Hedrington says maintenance directors are “very elated” about. The

usual \$2 million maintenance allocation has been bumped up to \$5 million. For the VIDE, Mrs. Wells-Hedrington says the upcoming transition offers a “breath of fresh air to be able to focus on the instructional aspect of the work that we do.”

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