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DPNR Faces Staffing Crisis Amid 20% Budget Cut; Lawmakers Urge Solutions

Legislators push for hosting employment drives, raising salaries, and strategic adjustments to fill 30 federally funded vacancies in the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, which is grappling with low morale and high turnover

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DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Lawmakers on the Committee of Budget, Finance and Appropriations on Tuesday made several suggestions on how the Department of Planning and Natural Resources could fill key vacancies in the face of an over 20 percent budget cut.

While defending his department's budget request, DPNR Commissioner Jean Pierre Oriol noted that the agency is having difficulty filling approximately 30 federally funded vacancies, eliciting major concern from legislators. Senator Diane Capeheart, who previously worked at DNPR, expressed her concern with the issue. "You've had a mass exodus of individuals leave your department. Your morale is low, and there's no one coming to work for DPNR," she argued. Characterizing DPNR as the "fourth biggest revenue generating department for the Government of the Virgin Islands," Ms. Capeheart urged Mr. Oriol to prioritize hiring.

?She suggested hosting an employment drive with the Division of Personnel and raising the salaries of those employees still with the department, something that Mr. Oriol said is already being considered. "We're looking to move what those starting salaries are, and then move existing personnel to a higher number so that the starting salary folks are not overtaking people," he said in response to a question from Senator Donna Frett-Gregory.?

Like Ms. Capeheart, the budget committee chair noted that DPNR is responsible for some critical aspects of central government. "We have the disaster recovery...we have so many environmental challenges," said Ms. Frett-Gregory, who wondered whether the federal government could be persuaded to allocate more funding for those positions supported by grant monies. "Is there an issue with you petitioning the federal government with regards to the salaries and saying, 'Look, this is not sufficient funding for us to get the work done with the federal dollars?'" she asked.

In response. Mr. Oriol explained that, "There is no new cooperative agreement money. So what happens is, in order to raise the salary of existing [staff], you are now also shaving off a position because you are separating that cash out. So you're making a decision for that." Instead, DPNR has worked to "align our grants to be able to pay everybody higher and do the stipulation agreements for those."?

However, just filling a vacant position was not the entirety of the issue, Mr. Oriol said. "It's not just the money, it's the qualifications of the people. So, again, I'm an agency that's looking for people with master's degrees in biological and environmental sciences [or] environmental engineering." Such candidates, Mr. Oriol explained, are relatively scarce. Answering a question from Ms. Frett-Gregory about how the department advertises their open positions, Mr. Oriol said that apart from using the Department of Personnel website, "which is attached to a few national databases", DPNR also posts vacancies with "other organizations that are aligned in the missions of what DPNR has to support....We go out beyond the territorial borders."

Ms. Frett-Gregory pointed out that the current salary scale is insufficient to attract the highly qualified candidates that DPNR needs. Senator Novelle Francis opined that "shaving off a position" to accommodate a higher salary in another post may be the best option for the department right now. "You consolidate the positions so that you could get the salaries to up the ante as well as the stipulation, or have individuals work outside of classification to be able to justify paying them the additional monies if that's allowable within your scope," Mr. Francis advised.?

He recommended that DPNR work with the Office of Collective Bargaining as a matter of urgency "so that you don't have to wait any long, extended, protracted period of time in being able to address this issue." Mr. Francis also noted that so many vacancies over a protracted period is hindering the efficacy of the department's operations. "You don't get any work done, and then you're not able to get anybody hired, and then you leave a level of frustration where a lot of individuals now leave the shop to go elsewhere to receive better salaries."

Mr. Oriol said DPNR has been working with the University of the Virgin Islands to identify qualified potential candidates. ““I have six master's graduates from the university. I believe we have provided them at least \$1 million in funding to continue putting out those individuals,” he told lawmakers.?

One of the key vacancies DPNR hopes to fill with an enhanced compensation offer is that of chief legal counsel. Currently at \$100,000 annually, Mr. Oriol acknowledged that “I think I'm going to have to actually increase the salary on that by \$10,000 to \$15,000.” The extra funds, he said, should attract a qualified, competent individual to fill that crucial role for the department.

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