

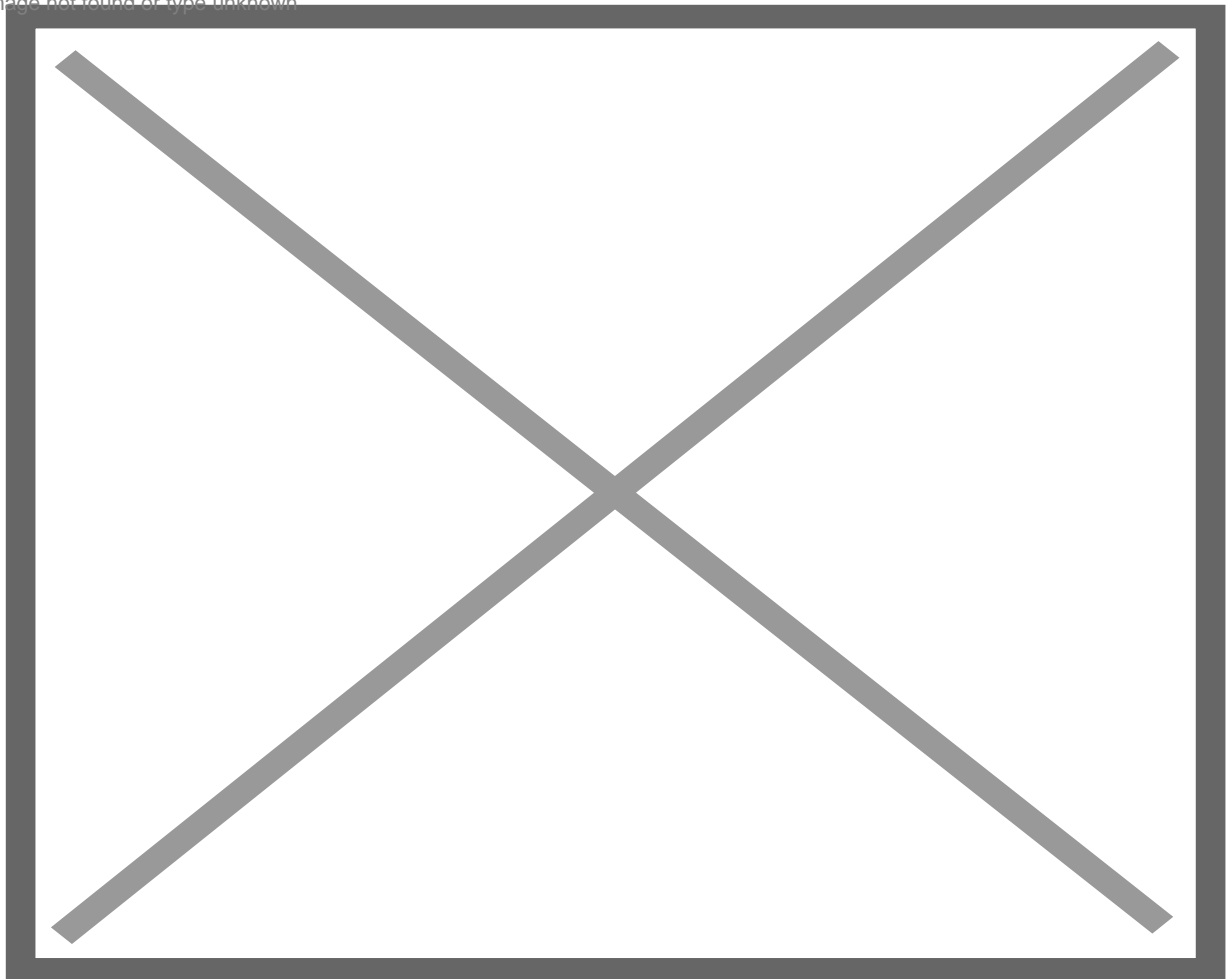
Lawmakers Criticize DPW for Overgrown Roads; Department Blames Vendor Payment Delays

Senators express frustration over obstructed thoroughfares, while DPW Commissioner Gabriel points to delayed payments to small business contractors as the primary cause

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A road railing overtaken by grass with the Point Udall sign barely visible through the overgrowth, captured on Thursday, June 27, 2024. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

When legislators took the Department of Public Works to task for overgrown brush along public thoroughfares across the territory, they quickly learned that the obstructed sidewalks and roads were just another consequence of the Government of the Virgin Islands' chronic inability to pay vendors promptly.

“It’s just unacceptable,” said Senator Franklin Johnson, who lamented that failure to maintain roadsides had transformed two-lane roads into one-way streets. DPW Commissioner Derek Gabriel admitted that it has gotten “out of control,” particularly on the island of St. Croix. However, a “perfect storm of factors” seems to be worsening what several have described as a hazard.

Increasingly heavy rains have been partially blamed for the rapidly growing grass, as Governor Albert Bryan Jr. alluded to in a [recent press briefing](#), but DPW's inability to pay roadside contractors is the primary cause of the issue. “These are small businesses...and when we can’t pay them for sometimes a fifth, sixth, or seventh week, they just can’t afford to keep the crews on the road,” Mr. Gabriel told lawmakers on the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance on Wednesday.

“This situation that we have is grave,” said committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory. She understood that individuals would not be willing to return to work if they were not paid wages owed to them. The Department of Finance, again, has been identified as the bottleneck in the process, causing lags in the disbursement of timely payments. “We've been working with the Department of Finance to try to find efficient ways to get something out to the roadside contractors,” Mr. Gabriel explained.

DPW has suggested an “alternate payment pattern” that would eliminate the need for payments to go through the Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software that government agencies use. While DPW is making some strides in settling outstanding debts to contractors, Mr. Gabriel agreed that there is much more that needs to be done.

Perhaps, suggested Sen. Frett-Gregory, a step toward doing more could be through re-engaging the Bureau of Corrections. “Around 2006 and back, the Bureau of Corrections was very involved in roadside clean up. The trustees would come out. What’s happening there,” she asked Mr. Gabriel.?

With the project having “worked for a while,” Mr. Gabriel shared that DPW is currently working to renew a contractual agreement. The department is hoping to recognize the “full potential” of the program in FY2025, with the support provided by the trustees directed towards the maintenance of the cemeteries. Frett-Gregory, though, suggested that the revitalized program should allow trustees from the BOC to provide roadside clean-up assistance as well. Referencing an incident where an inmate attempted to escape, she noted that “these things happen,” but should not be reason enough to end the program.

“We're talking about preventing recidivism,” she said, further noting that the GVI already spends hefty sums feeding, clothing, and providing medical care to inmates. “We have a government where we are challenged with funding. We have to look at every area where we can support the work.” The chair of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance has promised to continue the discussion with the BOC when its leaders appear before the 35th Legislature to defend its FY2025 budget recommendation. “We have to figure out how to get our inmates on the road doing some work, and our correction officers out there with them.”?

Adding to the discussion, Senator Kenneth Gittens suggested that community service, which would include roadside clean-up, could be used as a form of punishment for individuals who commit minor offenses. “Rather than sending them to jail and letting them sit down on their backside all day long, feeding and clothing them, we need to do this community service.”

