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Plans Unveiled for New Rencelier Gibbs Fire Station in Cotton Valley, St. Croix

CZM Hears Presentation on FEMA-Approved Replacement Project, with Discussions on Police Auxiliary Unit and Proximity to Waste Management Facility

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On Tuesday afternoon, the St. Croix Coastal Zone Management Committee heard about plans to replace the Rencelier Gibbs Fire Station in Cotton Valley, Christiansted.

No decisions were taken on the application for federal consistency determination; that will come during a subsequent meeting. However John Woods, director of architecture for the Jaredian Design Group, took commissioners through a presentation on how the new station would be constructed. “This fire station...already exists, but it has been approved by FEMA for replacement, a functional replacement,” he began, adding that the Federal Emergency

Management Agency has also approved the construction of a “safe room”.

The new construction will occur while the current fire station on the property is still in use, “so we had to place it in a location where it wouldn’t interfere with the existing structure,” Mr. Woods noted.

CZM board member Kai Nielsen questioned the omission of the capability to house a police auxiliary unit on the site, “even with the fact that we don’t have a service area out there past Basin Triangle.” Mr. Nielsen pushed for the inclusion of such a unit, notwithstanding having an auxiliary unit “in the heart of Christiansted...having one towards the East End makes sense.”

However, Mr. Woods explained that FEMA would not provide funding for that because a VIPD auxiliary unit does not exist at the original fire station. While the design could be adjusted to include it, “the local government would have to fund it,” Mr. Woods said. FEMA has already agreed to some expansion in scope from the original structure, including larger dormitories which were needed because of the merging of the territory’s fire and emergency medical services agencies.

A query about why firefighters occupying the existing station are not moved to another site to free up the entire property for construction was also answered by pointing to FEMA’s strict requirements. “The issue with new sites, that becomes a real challenge with FEMA trying to convince them that the site has to move,” said Mr. Woods. “I don’t think they believe they had to move from this site.”

Mr. Woods also revealed that the planned safe room was designed to accommodate more people than just the fire service and emergency personnel. He said that questions about whether it will be made available for the public to occupy during storms would be something that V.I. Fire & Emergency Services (VIFEMS) would have to answer.

While scheduling conflicts prevented the attendance of senior V.I. FEMS personnel at Tuesday’s CZM meeting, Mr. Woods promised that they would be present at the decision meeting to answer these and other questions.

St. Croix CZM Chair Masserae Webster expressed concerns about the location of the new fire station on the property being too close to a planned Waste Management Authority convenience center on an adjacent lot. “In terms of rodents and things like that that come along with garbage...I think that’s a concern that the government should look at,” she said. Acknowledging that the project is a needed one which has been in the planning stages for sometime, Ms. Webster nevertheless argued that authorities should consider relocating the new structure “more to the south,” or demolishing the existing building so that the new fire station could be built on that same spot. Ms. Webster also advocated for the addition of a police substation, urging the government “to look at how they can fund adding on” the auxiliary unit. “After you leave Basin Triangle, there’s no police station, as opposed to going west,” she noted.

Mr. Nielsen argued that the additional functionality should not be difficult to justify. “The President of the United States literally vacations there. His wife was just there. Our Vice President of the United States was here. We have no auxiliary force on that side.”

V.I. FEMS Director Antonio Stevens, who logged in to the virtual meeting from a Homeland Security conference in Miami, came in at the tail end of the discussion to reassure commissioners that space in the new building could be allocated as he sees fit. Mr. Stevens explained that there used to be a police unit stationed in the Cotton Valley station years ago, “but for some reason it

was removed – basically could have been for the lack of personnel.” However, he promised that “if anyone wants to be housed out there with us...we can provide that space for you.”

Nevertheless, he warned that “we cannot force them to be a part of it,” so the question of whether a police unit is ultimately included within the new Rencelier Gibbs Fire Station will be up to the VIPD.?

The public as of Tuesday had seven days within which to submit comments, concerns and other feedback about the new fire station to CZM, which board members will consider when it comes time to decide on the federal consistency determination for the project.

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