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Public Works Announces Major Upgrade to Public Transit Fleet, Including Electric Buses and New ADA-Compliant Ferry

DPW's 14-month plan includes the acquisition of 19 new buses, with a focus on transitioning to hybrid and electric vehicles, while addressing potential challenges in fleet maintenance and disposal

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The Department of Public Works hopes to improve public transportation options by completely replacing fixed-route and paratransit buses in the territory. That's according to Derek Gabriel, DPW commissioner who provided an update on the status of roads, road projects and public transportation before the Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications Committee on Wednesday.

In his testimony, he informed legislators that the acquisition of new buses will occur “over the next 14 months,” and that VITRAN will “transition its fleet from fossil fuels to hybrid and electric buses.” The electric transition has already begun, as the Virgin Islands Energy Office funded the acquisition of two electric vans for the St. Croix district [earlier this year](#). “VITRAN will continue this path by purchasing electric service trucks and supporting vehicles,” Mr. Gabriel explained. DPW intends to purchase 9 fixed-route buses and 10 paratransit buses.

The decision to transition is largely economic. “Maintaining the current fleet of diesel-operated vehicles continues to be difficult with bus manufacturing facilities closing and...needed parts almost impossible to find,” Mr. Gabriel lamented. But while Senator Angel Bolques was impressed with the plan, he expressed concern over the ability to properly maintain hybrid and electric fleets. “Any bus contract that we enter into, we're making sure that there's a clause to get our mechanics properly trained,” Mr. Gabriel made known.

?With a full fleet replacement imminent, Senator Marvin Blyden wondered what would happen to the old vehicles. He was disheartened to learn that DPW would eventually “dispose of the ones that are no longer useful.” The department contends that since all of the buses have surpassed their useful life, “we definitely have to take them out of service.”

DPW is aware that several nonprofits and churches often reach out to purchase out-of-service buses, but Mr. Gabriel expressed reservations about facilitating those auctions. “We have to make a prudent decision,” he cautioned. “If they don't have the wherewithal to keep it on the road...if they don't have a mechanic that's versed in keeping it on the road...they become a hindrance to the government because then they end up on the roadside.” Lawmakers have been [struggling to find solutions](#) for the territory-wide proliferation of abandoned vehicles.

Still, Senator Blyden was convinced that the buses could be salvaged. “People are very creative these days...People use them to build homes,” he countered.

Meanwhile, DPW also has plans to expand transportation options at sea, with the construction of a 300-passenger, ADA-compliant ferry about 50% complete. The ferry will service Cruz Bay and Red Hook during “peak hours and high demand periods.” The department “intends to issue an RFQ to both ferry franchisees to determine who will operate the new vessel.” It was Mr. Bolques who again expressed some hesitation. “What are the plans if it doesn't generate the revenue that we're expecting?” he asked, referencing the current availability of two ferries.

“I can't foresee it not generating the revenue that we think,” Mr. Gabriel replied. DPW has “data that supports that larger vessel, particularly during the rush hour season.” The real challenge, he said, “is going to be how whichever operator is awarded the ferry, [will] fit it into their fleet... but I think both operators would tell you they think this will be a tremendous upgrade.”