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Lawmakers Urge VIHA to Prioritize Residents Amid \$200 Million Housing Redevelopment Effort

As VIHA plans to build 300 units annually and revitalize senior housing communities, legislators express concerns over impact on current residents, with Senator Capehart highlighting safety concerns for seniors living with behavioral challenges

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The Walter I.M. Hodge Pavilion, located at 1 Centerline Road in Frederiksted, St. Croix.

There were repeated appeals for the leadership of the Virgin Islands Housing Authority to exercise due consideration to current residents of housing communities when VIHA testified before the Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications on Monday.?

Their comments followed an extensive update from VIHA's executive director, Dwayne Alexander. He informed legislators that in a bid to increase the territory's affordable housing stock, the authority plans to "revitalize or construct around 300 units annually." That work began in earnest in 2024, seven years after Hurricanes Irma and Maria damaged housing communities, necessitating approximately "\$240 million in additional costs." Before the 2017 hurricanes, VIHA was "already confronting over \$200 million in deferred capital improvements across its housing stock," testified Mr. Alexander.

"We have about \$200 million [in FEMA funds] left, and we are using portions of that money for development as well as restoring existing deficiencies that we have in our properties," Mr. Alexander told Senator Dwayne DeGraff.

"Despite the allegations of substantial recovery funding, only a small portion has been utilized for necessary upgrades and underscores the urgent need for a revitalized strategic approach," contended Mr. Alexander. He was pleased to inform lawmakers that VIHA is progressing on "four key redevelopment projects."

VIHA is still focused on "initiating the development of 144 new housing units through the [Estate Donoe Redevelopment](#) project," Mr. Alexander told lawmakers. He said that VIHA is awaiting "approval for a substantial amendment to the CDBG-DR funds which could allocate an additional \$46 million to facilitate the completion of the project." Once approvals are in place, construction is expected to recommence in the first quarter of 2025, with plans for completion in December 2026, four years beyond the original December 2022 completion date for the project.

Meanwhile, at the Estate Tutu North Senior Housing Redevelopment where 60 accessible units are planned, VIHA is "targeting financial closing for this project in the second quarter of next year," with December 2027 as the target date for completion. The rehabilitation of 106 units is also expected to proceed on the D. Hamilton Jackson Terrace, with this project estimated to be complete by December 2026.

Mr. Alexander further informed lawmakers of plans for a senior housing complex in Estate Stony Ground, Frederiksted, St. Croix. "The first phase encompasses 98 units distributed across four buildings," said the executive director, who explained that the property would "offer replacement housing for the residents of Wilfred Pedro Homes." The authority is awaiting environmental approvals and acquisition authority from the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development to proceed with the property purchase.

But while VIHA may be buoyed by their recent work and efforts to create comfortable housing for Virgin Islanders, several lawmakers were less than convinced. "You ain't going to get no housing facilities built by 2027," contended Senator DeGraff, who encouraged VIHA to be realistic. "You're wasting money to try to build these facilities with \$200 million versus taking that money and bringing them up to standard, livable places for people to go home to every day."

The current plan, outlined by Mr. Alexander, is for VIHA to use \$70 million of the \$200 million sum for redevelopment, while \$130 million will be used "for the repairs, for the exteriors, the roofs, the doors and windows at each other existing public housing community," he said.

In his testimony, Mr. Alexander also described plans for the "comprehensive rehabilitation of 240 units at the Walter I.M. Hodge Pavilion where "about 126 units are vacant and ready to be leased."

Senator Diane Capehart, meanwhile, was concerned about the well-being of senior citizens who would need to be relocated from the D. Hamilton Jackson housing community where she once lived. In response, Mr. Alexander noted that VIHA has detailed plans to relocate some residents, perhaps to the Walter I.M Hodge community, but may also “do some revitalization while folks [are] there on location.” Residents have been informed, he testified.?

“I’m very concerned about our seniors and their living spaces,” lamented Ms. Capehart. She referenced reports by elderly women who have expressed safety concerns. “We’re placing individuals with behavioral challenges in there, and we have single women living there.” The lawmaker went on to lament the deterioration of accommodation options for the territory’s senior citizens. “I think we are doing our elderly people wrong,” she asserted, asking the Housing Authority to designate specific units for elderly tenants, such as downstairs apartments.

?Notwithstanding comments from lawmakers, VIHA is prepared to forge ahead with their work. Mr. Alexander boasted an increased closure rate of work orders at various properties. “The dedication of our team has resulted in a 30% increase in productivity. This improvement is not just a statistic. It represents our employees’ hard work and commitment to delivering better service,” he said.