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Senators Push Back as WMA Proposes Ending Garbage Collection at Public Housing Following Department of Education Cuts

Interim CEO Daryl Griffith highlights \$600,000 in potential savings by shifting trash collection responsibilities, but lawmakers criticize the approach

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The Louis E. Brown Apartments on St. Croix. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The Waste Management Authority has made significant progress in cutting costs, according to interim CEO Daryl Griffith. During his testimony before the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Monday, Griffith noted that the authority's budget overrun has dropped from \$15 million two years ago to \$2 million this year, which he highlighted as steady

improvement in financial management.

Despite the positive trends described by Mr. Griffith, committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory said she was “challenged” by some of the strategies used by the authority to reduce spending. She was particularly dismayed to learn of intentions to cease trash collection in housing communities and the end of trash collection at the territory’s public schools.

Senator Marvin Blyden brought up the subject at first, asking whether the V.I. Housing Authority had begun its own garbage collection efforts after WMA’s former director Roger Merritt made the decision to end garbage collection at public housing communities.

“They haven’t started collecting yet,” Mr. Griffith responded, admitting that he had been forewarned by VIHA officials that the “Senate was going to try and block us from stopping that.” Mr. Griffith nevertheless made an impassioned appeal to the 35th Legislature. “Hopefully you don’t, because that will save us on both islands about \$600,000 for garbage collection,” he explained. The promise of such significant cost savings is why WMA approached the Housing Authority, and also why WMA has approached the Department of Education.

“The Department of Education has taken over their garbage collection at the schools and doing it with the same private haulers that we were paying,” Mr. Griffith informed lawmakers, explaining that waste collection for the Department of Education was not done by the WMA itself. With DOE now using these private contractors to get the job done, Mr. Griffith said WMA can “put more focus on our big problems: our bin sites and our landfills.”

Senator Frett-Gregory, who has previously advocated for residents to start directly contributing towards trash collection services, was immediately perturbed that the responsibility had been shifted onto DOE. “I don’t know how much of their budget is being used,” Mr. Griffith said, in response to the senator’s query.

“We are giving you \$35 million and you are charging the Department of Education to pick up trash. Something’s wrong with that picture,” Frett-Gregory contended. “The Department of Education should not be paying to pick up trash... If I was the Department of Education, I wouldn’t give you one dime. Tell them to take it out of the \$35 million,” she said.

Increasingly agitated, Frett-Gregory reminded Mr. Griffith that the government has repeatedly bailed them out of tough financial situations. “The Waste Management Authority has decided that they’re not going to pay the Virgin as Water and Power Authority, and we just paid it for you. That’s not right.”

“As it stands, the Department of Education [has] their own struggles,” she lamented. Frett-Gregory advised Mr. Griffith that if WMA wants to identify entities that should facilitate their own garbage collection, the Department of Education “should not be first.” “I just can’t believe that these are the things that we are allowing here,” she said.

There was no mention of garbage collection costs when the Department of Education appeared before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance to [defend its FY2025 budget](#) on July 1st. It is therefore unclear what the cost and funding source for trash collection will be.

Frett-Gregory has promised to facilitate a “deeper dive” into the new arrangement.