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Lawmakers Approve Leases in Support of Waste Management, Public Broadcasting, and Youth Agricultural Programs

Senate Committee greenlights leases to facilitate new WMA convenience centers, WTJX's headquarters rebuild, and a St. Croix initiative aimed at engaging youth in sustainable agriculture and career development

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The Waste Management Authority, Public Broadcasting System, and St. Croix Science Teachers Association can now look forward to beginning new expansion endeavors as on Monday, after the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance approved leases and conveyances set to benefit each entity.

According to Vincent Richard, assistant commissioner at the Department of Property and Procurement, each lease would “contribute to the growth and long-term stability and economic sustainability.”

The first order of business during Monday’s meeting was bill 35-0384, a request for the approval of the amendment of a lease granted to the WMA in June 2022. A typographical error at the time of drafting meant that the incorrect plot of land was listed on the lease. “All of the terms and conditions set out in the [2022] lease agreement shall remain in full force and effect,” explained Mr. Richards. There are plans to construct a convenience center on the parcel of land located in Kings Hill, St. Croix.

Convenience centers, including those planned for Cotton Valley, Estate Concordia and Mon Bijou are critical to WMA’s “integrated solid waste management plan,” said the authority’s interim executive director, Daryl Griffith. WMA is currently preparing to “award the contract and start the design of these convenience centers.” In reply to committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory’s query about when the new centers would come online, Mr. Griffith would only say “shortly.”

Lawmakers also considered Bill 35-0374, an act approving the conveyance of parcel 201, Submarine Base SouthSide Quarter, St. Thomas from the Government of the Virgin Islands to the Virgin Islands Public Broadcasting System at a nominal cost of \$1. The bill also requested consideration of the joining of parcels 158 and 158A on Hay Piece Hill, the original home of the Public Broadcasting System, damaged by Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

According to Tanya-Marie Singh, WTJX’s chief executive officer, consolidation of the plot is a requirement for the Department of Planning and Natural Resources building permitting process. Unusable on their own, leaving parcels 201 and 158A separate would pose significant challenges for WTJX during the construction of its new main office and studio. It would “significantly reduce the flexibility of the design options, the density of each site would have to be calculated separately, and utilities would have to be duplicated,” explained Ms. Singh.

Once the Legislature approves the conveyances and quitclaim deed, WTJX will begin the permitting process for the reconstruction of its headquarters. “I know that you are excited about it happening as much as we are because it’s been a while and you need a home,” Senator Frett-Gregory remarked.

Next, legislators listened to testimony from Rosa White Cromwell, president of the St. Croix Science Teachers Association. She appealed for support for Bill 35-0383. The Association intends to use the 27.43 18 U.S. acres of VICORP Land in King Quarter, St. Croix for a crop production program for the island’s youth. According to Ms. Cromwell, the program intends to “bridge the gap between agriculture and agriculture in the classroom, develop a new generation of farmers, and provide information on diverse careers in agriculture.”

Students enrolled in the program will work with farmers, engage in research, and gain practical experience including learning to identify soils and food production. Senator Novelle Francis commended the Association for their “innovation and efforts to educate the next generation of environmentalists, scientists and farmers.” Likewise, Senator Marvin Blyden was “excited” about plans to establish a youth-led food forest.

Per the lease, the association must pay an annual rent of \$411.48. Supportive of the Association’s plan, Senator Dwayne DeGraff contended that “it shouldn’t be no more than \$1.” He declared that “something [is] wrong” with charging rent to an entity using government-owned lands to teach concepts related to agriculture to youth. Sen. Samuel Carrion agreed. “If we could convey a

quietclaim of a deed for \$1 to WTJX, why can't we lease the property to you for \$1 also," he argued.

But for Senator Frett-Gregory, bringing new revenue into the coffers of the GVI should be a priority. "We worked on this budget and we struggled to find revenues...Once you bring revenue-generating ideas, we could do all of these great things that we're talking about," she told her colleagues. She instead suggested that entities like the St. Croix Science Teachers Association seek federal grants to support their work. The association which is currently going through a resurgence is operating out of pocket, according to Ms. Cromwell.

Ultimately, lawmakers voted in favor of all three leases which will now be considered in the Committee on Rules and Judiciary.

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