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Senators Set 60-Day Plan Amid St. Croix's Struggles With Unfinished Projects and Declining Population

With unfinished projects and declining population threatening the island's future, senators pledge increased accountability and oversight to address critical infrastructure, crime, and healthcare issues

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The Paul E. Joseph Stadium on St. Croix has been under construction for a decade, plagued by numerous delays and ongoing development challenges. By. V.I. DEPT. OF PUBLIC WORKS

Lawmakers on Wednesday reaffirmed their commitment to justly serving the people of the Virgin Islands at a commemorative swearing-in ceremony held in St. Croix. Members of the 36th

Legislature filed into the Frits E. Lawaetz Conference Room, having already taken the oath of office in St. Thomas on Monday.

Led by Senate President Milton Potter, senators capitalized on the opportunity to outline their hopes for the new legislative term. Among them was Senator Kurt Vialet, who like several of his colleagues, hoped for increased accountability and greater results.

“St. Croix isn't in a great place, and we all know it. We all feel it. We all see it,” he lamented. He bemoaned the exodus of Virgin Islanders from the territory following the 2017 hurricanes, and observed that the “the tax base has been eroded.” Mr. Vialet issued a warning to his colleagues, underpinned by the territory’s current reality. “There are a lot of other factors that come along with a decline in population and unless we, collectively as senators, are able to improve the quality of life on St. Croix, the numbers are going to continue to decrease.”

“St. Croix looks like a big construction zone with no end in sight as to when the projects will be completed,” Mr. Vialet lamented, referencing the Paul E. Joseph Stadium and the still incomplete Randall “Doc” James Racetrack.

For Mr. Vialet, increased focus on oversight and accountability will be critical for the 36th Legislature. “You could give as much money as you want, [but] if you don't internally change the structure, it's going to continue to be the same,” he said.

With the territory facing mounting challenges including crime, delayed infrastructure projects, chronically late vendor payments and critical issues in the healthcare sector, Senator Ray Fonseca has proposed declaring [a hospital state of emergency](#) to fast-track hospital reconstruction projects that continue to lag despite a wealth of available federal funds for that purpose. During his allotted time on Wednesday, Mr. Fonseca also appealed for a state of emergency to be declared so the territory's pressing healthcare issues can be addressed. “We have to be able to complete the design, the procurement and the construction for all the hospitals...We need a health state of emergency right now so we can get the hospitals procured.”

Mr. Vialet, though hopeful for expediency where reconstruction efforts are concerned, was less convinced that a state of emergency would be the solution. “We had a state of emergency for mental health, and nothing has improved... We have a state of emergency for WAPA, nothing ain't change.” Instead, he doubled down on the need for greater supervision from the legislature. “We could call them before this body and ask the hard questions. But if we call them here, are we laughing and joking with them?... Then we're not going to bring about change.”

“We have kind of given ourselves a 60-day window to bring about some change,” Mr. Vialet told the listening public. “We're going to have some oversight – some meetings – where the community will be able to say ‘the Senate is moving in the right direction because they're holding individuals responsible’.”