

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Legislators Demand Answers From Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance on Repair Delays

With maintenance delays disrupting schools across the territory, legislators demand solutions. The Bureau says a lack of emergency funds has stalled repairs, prompting calls for increased financial resources to address urgent issues.

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Bureau of School Construction Executive Director Craig Benjamin at the V.I. Legislature on Wednesday. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

The [recently established](#) Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance is facing pressure from several members of the 36th Legislature who are not pleased with the

perceived lags in the Bureau's response time. The matter was raised by various lawmakers when the Bureau appeared before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development on Wednesday.

Senator Novelle Francis, for one, encouraged the Bureau to tackle "low-hanging fruit" at the territory's schools. Similarly, Senator Carla Joseph lamented the slow pace of acting on several outstanding maintenance projects at the Julius E. Sprauve School on St. John, including a sizable hole between two of the school's modular units. "These are very easy fixes. I could go with a two-by-four and fix that hole quickly... That's not a major issue. That's one two by four, and I'm good with a drill," said Ms. Joseph, demanding explanations for their apparent inability to act in a timely fashion.

The Bureau's team pushed back on criticism from lawmakers, however. Bobby Ferris, BSCM's assistant director responsible for the St. Croix district, informed lawmakers that "there are some challenges that exist that cause a lapse in how maintenance is done." The lack of money is a major obstacle, Mr. Ferris claimed. He responded to Senator Joseph's claim that "she could get a two-by-four and fix it" by informing lawmakers that the Bureau "doesn't have access to that two-by-four."

"In other words, if I needed to go out and fix that same situation that she was talking about, I could not go to Home Depot or another lumber area and buy that two-by-four today if it was an emergency," Mr. Ferris said. This is because, four months after coming into being, the Bureau does not yet have access to any immediate forms of funding. "We have emergency situations but don't have access to a lot of emergency funding to get it done," Mr. Ferris testified. "The availability of funding is one of our biggest problems in getting a lot of the day-to-day activities repaired."

It's something that he says the Bureau is currently addressing. However, some of the necessary tasks are awaiting action from the Department of Finance, including establishing accounts to access imprest funds — fixed cash funds set aside for small, recurring expenses in an organization. Lawmakers were shocked to learn that the Department of Finance had only approved \$5,000 in day-to-day operational funds for work in each district.

"I thought you were going to say at least \$50,000," said a bewildered Senator Kurt Vialet, committee chair. He was informed that the Bureau requested a \$50,000 threshold, but the Department of Finance set the limit at a fraction of that amount.

"One plumber coming in could charge you \$1,000," offered Mr. Vialet, who maintained that the approved imprest funding limit was woefully inadequate. "When you have a school and your pump goes bad, or you have a leak, you can't wait days for it to be repaired, because you have to dismiss school."

Vialet has committed to legislative action, proposing the creation of an imprest account to ensure funds are readily available for future needs. He explained that by setting aside sufficient funding, the Senate would be able to address similar issues more efficiently, preventing delays caused by financial constraints. Vialet is confident that his fellow senators are on board with the plan and will support the necessary legislative adjustments to implement it.

“We don't want to hear the excuse...We want the Bureau to be successful. We don't want you to fail. So we have to do what is necessary to tweak your legislation,” he promised.

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