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Senators Press Education Officials on Surge in Cost of Arthur A. Richards School Construction

Following a Consortium report on the \$100 million cost increase, lawmakers demand answers on rising expenses, funding gaps, and whether the design-build approach is suitable for the Virgin Islands.

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The Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School under construction at the former Evelyn M. Williams Elementary School site in Mount Pleasant West, St. Croix. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The recent surge in reconstruction costs for the [Arthur A. Richards School](#) by over \$100 million has left Senator Kurt Vialet doubting that the design-build approach to development is a good fit for the Virgin Islands.

“The design-build has not worked for the Virgin Islands,” he insisted, after listening to an explanation of why the price of the project had increased by such a great amount from a representative of the Department of Education during Wednesday’s Committee on Education and Workforce Development meeting.

“At the first juncture that would be referred to, the company said it was going to cost \$159 million,” Senator Violet, the committee's chair, noted. VIDE’s architect, Chaneel Callwood, however, informed Mr. Violet that the figure was simply “a good starting point, a good minimum budget.” She clarified that, as [exclusively reported by the Consortium](#), approximately \$30 million worth of new additions have been attached to the project, including a swimming pool. Security considerations, too, have hiked costs up.

“Since the design had been done in late 2020, there have been several more mass shootings of students,” said Ms. Callwood, referring to incidents across the nation. “We put in metal detectors and other things like that...we also changed the layout of some of the spaces to address security. We increased the number of cameras in the facility dramatically,” the VIDE architect told Senator Violet.

In accordance with a request from the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, VIDE has also added drainage for the entire watershed to the project. “We did hear a lot of concerns about flooding, so we went above and beyond for that,” Ms. Callwood said. “A culvert is going in outside our property,” she added. These projects have added up to \$30 million.

The other \$75 million in increases has been chalked up to “greater prices for concrete.” “The project started out being built of concrete blocks that would be reinforced with poured concrete, and we changed it to solid poured concrete,” Ms. Callwood told lawmakers.

VIDE will receive \$240 million from the Federal Emergency Management Agency for this project, \$24 million less than the current project cost, committee members learned. Violet then pressed for information on how the remainder of the funds would be sourced. “We are in the process of applying for a hazardous Mitigation Program Grant, also from FEMA,” replied Ms. Callwood. VIDE is hopeful for a \$35 million award. “We also have the ability to pull funds from the Charles H. Emmanuel project since we are not rebuilding there, and that has \$102 million.”

Violet offered resistance to that idea. “Suppose we really want to open Charles H,” he said, urging VIDE to “keep an open mind.”

Nonetheless, the reconstruction of the Arthur A. Richards School is on schedule for completion by July 31st, 2026, according to Craig Benjamin, director of the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance.

On Wednesday, he provided testimony that “over 60% of the work [is] already completed.” He told lawmakers that “structural steel roof connectors are in place or in the final stage of insertion.” It’s one of several “significant milestones” that Mr. Benjamin says they have met, along with pouring exterior walls. “The project team is on track to meet its schedule goal, and efforts to maintain this momentum will continue as the construction advances towards its next phase,” he assured lawmakers.

However, Senator Franklin Johnson, who visited the Arthur A. Richards School site on Tuesday, expressed doubt over the reported 60% completion assessment. He based his skepticism on the status of the roof, stating, “If the roof ain't there, I don't know how we're going to be at 60%. Only one of the roofs has the steel structure beam on it.”

While acknowledging the progress made, Senator Johnson emphasized that he did not agree with the percentage estimate, adding, “They're doing good. I'm not knocking it down. I appreciated what I saw. I just don't agree with 60%.”

Ms. Callwood promised to supply senators with the “correct percentage” as the project’s contractors work to achieve the scheduled completion date.

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