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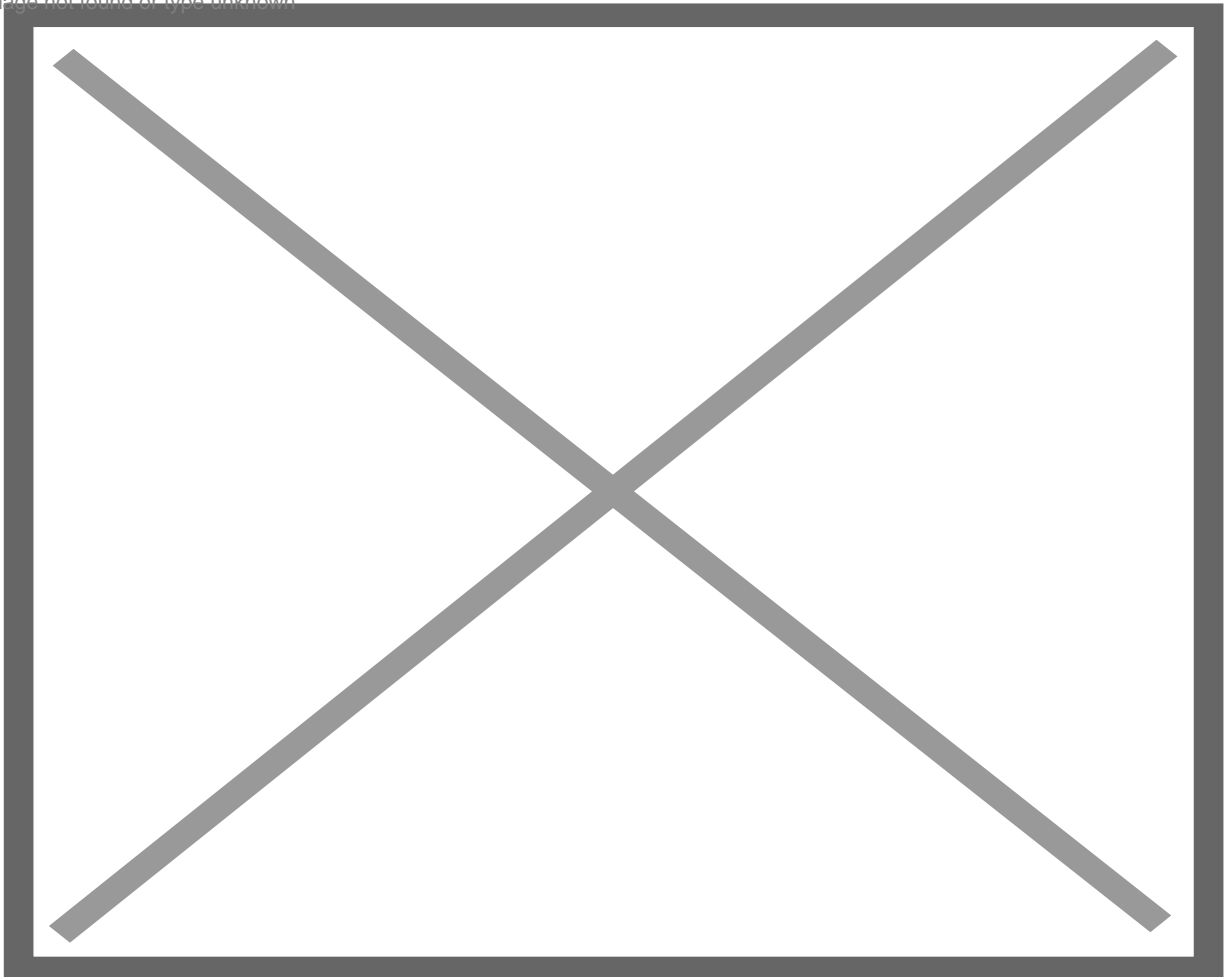
Lawmakers Rebuke VIHFA for Poor Communication as Unannounced Demolition Contaminates LBJ Gardens Cisterns

VIHFA officials admit failure to notify residents before demolition work, leading to potential water contamination and prompting urgent calls for corrective action.

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Structure in Front of LBJ Gardens Residences By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The leadership of the V.I. Housing Finance Authority was reprimanded by lawmakers on Thursday for failing to adequately inform residents of LBJ Gardens of demolition work that has reportedly resulted in contaminated cisterns.

The issue was raised by Senator Hubert Frederick in a meeting of the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning. He said he had been receiving reports from impacted residents of “messed up” roofs and cisterns. “No one has been out there to test the water. They're still using the water. What are we doing?” Senator Frederick demanded.

By VIHFA’s own admission, residents of LBJ Gardens had not yet been informed of the demolition start date because “a contractor got ahead of us.” That was the explanation provided by Dayna Clendenin, VIHFA’s chief operations officer. “We have gone back with our legal team to verify who's responsible in terms of covering their costs,” Ms. Clendenin explained. VIHFA has also scheduled a cross-agency town hall meeting for March 19th to address resident concerns stemming from the demolition project, which has since been halted.

Senator Novelle Francis, however, was “dumbfounded” as to how VIHFA allowed the contractor to “get ahead” of them. “You’re saying that they actually started a project without authorization or permission?” he asked Ms. Clendenin. Senator Francis, like his colleagues, recalled that discussions on relocating the residents of LBJ Gardens predated the demolition work that began a week ago.

As Ms. Clendenin explained, the contractor began working immediately after receiving notice to proceed but did not erect fencing and signage as required by the authority. Nor did the contractor “issue back to us the schedule.” Instead, work began on Saturday, two days before VIHFA intended to begin public information. “Plans were to go out to them and say ‘Hey, this is happening’,” explained Ms. Clendenin, along with the issuance of a press release.

“I’m just concerned that we continue to find ourselves with these errors,” Senator Francis noted. “I believe that there's an opportunity for us to be able to address our constituency well before it hits the fan.” According to the lawmaker, VIHFA has positioned itself to “backpedal and be on the defensive.” “As a government, we have to do better in being able to address these issues at the forefront,” Senator Francis advised.

Committee chair Senator Marise James again raised the option of buying the residents out, urging VIHFA to “be creative.” She wondered whether Community Disaster Block Grant funding could be used for that purpose. “We can’t displace people and then not help them,” Ms. James cautioned.

Senator Kurt Vialet, however, was less gracious. “Why are we having a discussion now in reference to relocation or possible funding source, when the question was asked before you even began the demolition,” he asked of Ms. Clendenin. “You started the demolition, then you got complaints from the residents, and then the demolition stopped. We’re now at a standstill. Now you're revisiting exactly what was already requested from one year ago.”

He referenced correspondence dated March 18th, 2024, and delivered to VIHFA which spoke to the possible relocation of LBJ Gardens residents. “Apparently, nothing was done in reference to relocation,” Mr. Vialet observed. “It's only being dealt with after the residents were affected. The cisterns are already possibly contaminated...Now we're dealing with it, saying we'll have a meeting in March. That is after the fact,” the lawmaker complained.

Eugene Jones, VIHFA’s executive director says the authority “takes full responsibility” and plans to “sit down and do our due diligence....We were supposed to go out there and talk to the residents about this demolition, so that was wrong. We know we have to correct that. Whatever damage he's done, we need to fix that,” said a presumably remorseful Mr. Jones.

The VIHFA director has also promised to “look at our funding opportunities so that we can relocate, or we can buy the whole property and be done with it.”

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