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Oppenheimer Beach Rehabilitation Underway with \$1 Million EDA Grant; Bolques Proposes Name Change

The historic Oppenheimer Beach Facility, once home to J. Robert Oppenheimer, the “Father of the Atomic Bomb,” is being restored with a \$1 million EDA grant. Sen. Angel Bolques Jr. seeks a name change of the iconic site.

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Oppenheimer Beach in St. John. By. EXPLORESTJ

Efforts are ongoing to rehabilitate the Oppenheimer Beach Facility on the island of St. John thanks to a \$1 million grant from the Economic Development Authority.

That information was provided by Vincent Roberts, acting commissioner of the Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation during Friday’s meeting of the Committee on Culture, Youth,

Aging, Sports and Parks. The meeting, held on St. John, focused on updates relevant to Love City.

The site of the Oppenheimer Beach Facility carries significant historical value. In 1950, the Gibney family purchased forty acres along Hawksnest Bay, a property that would later become known as Gibney Beach. A small portion of this land was later sold to Robert Oppenheimer, known as the “Father of the Atomic Bomb.” Oppenheimer built a modest home near the shoreline for himself, his wife, and his daughter—a structure that still stands today. Eventually, the Oppenheimer family deeded the property to the people of St. John, and it now serves as a public recreation center.

According to Mr. Roberts’s testimony, the current phase of the project involves a geotechnical study to “assist in the designing of the proper coastal protection for the beach house,” a requirement of the EDA grant. Such a study was already in progress when the contractor passed away, forcing DSPR to “start the process over again,” Mr. Roberts told lawmakers. The new study is expected to be ready by the end of February. The Department is also working closely with the Coastal Zone Management program to ensure nearby mangroves are protected.

Unlike several other rehabilitation projects territory-wide, the Oppenheimer Beach Facility is not a recipient of federal funding due to the beachfront location of the facility. Insurance proceeds from the damaged building totaled \$79,000, “which was not enough to complete or even do repairs to the facility,” Mr. Roberts shared.

The update piqued the interest of several lawmakers, including committee chair Angel Bolques Jr., the territory's at-large senator. “The location of the building is very, very close to the water,” Senator Bolques observed, remembering that the shoreline was “a lot lower” decades ago. “Perhaps demolishing it and moving the facility further up would be the best,” he suggested, fearful that the building could be consumed by the sea in coming years.

But as Mr. Roberts clarified, “moving the building will require a lot more funding,” and the Department is limited to its \$1 million grant budget. However, despite the hesitancy of the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide funding, Senator Bolques argued that “we could still go out and look for other grants and federal assistance even though it may be in a tsunami zone... This is our only recreational facility on the shoreline, so perhaps there may be some consideration or extenuating circumstances that they would actually work with us on that.” The lawmaker said that he is “willing to do what I need to do to try to make that happen.”

In the interim however, Bolques has urged DSPR to “communicate with the members of this committee, because I really want to see that project fast-tracked.” He considered the facility “[DSPR’s] biggest revenue generator.”

Bolques has also signaled his intention to introduce legislation to rename not just the facility, but the beach as well. “J. Robert Oppenheimer is the creator of the atomic bomb... responsible for killing millions of people. I know that we've been colonized [but] I think at some point we need to step away from that and name things after our people, name things after things that are important to us... I think the time has passed for that.”