

The Virgin Islands Consortium

USVI Cemeteries Near Capacity, Public Works Pushes for Expansion and Burial Alternatives

With limited space in cemeteries, DPW is negotiating land purchases and considering crypts, columbariums, and sea burials. Ongoing projects include a protective wall at Western Cemetery No. 3 and planned road improvements for easier gravesite access.

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Aerial shot of the Cemetery in St. Thomas. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

Solutions to the rapidly dwindling available space within the territory's cemeteries remain a priority for the Department of Public Works, stated Commissioner Derek Gabriel when he appeared before the Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications

on Friday. “Our cemeteries have definitely been a focus of the department, at least since 2021,” he maintained.

According to Mr. Gabriel, DPW continues to explore avenues for cemetery expansion and alternative burial options, including ongoing negotiations to purchase property adjacent to the Smith Bay Eastern Cemetery in St. Thomas. Most recently, the Department of Property and Procurement has been roped into that conversation. “There is a very specific process [and] we have initiated that process. It is taking quite a while, but we are trying to find ways to expedite it,” explained Mr. Gabriel to the committee’s chair, Senator Marvin Blyden.

The terrain of St. Thomas, in particular, makes it difficult to identify new locations for cemetery space. It’s why DPW says they are also focused on “efficient ways to manage our cemeteries.” Friday’s suggestions from Mr. Gabriel have been espoused by the department before, and include constructing crypts. Columbariums – structures that house crematory urns – should also be built, as a growing preference for cremations is contributing to “more efficient burials,” said Mr. Gabriel. DPW is also collaborating with the Department of Public Works in “exploring more sea burials as well.”

According to Gabriel, some progress has already been made in constructing new, space-saving burial infrastructure. He assured lawmakers that “we’re looking at all avenues. It is something that we’re really pushing.”

In the meantime, several projects are ongoing at the territory’s existing cemeteries. The erection of a wall around Western Cemetery NO. 3 in St. Thomas is currently 40% completed, Mr. Gabriel reported. “We will also have signage, and we will also include minor repairs to other areas of Western Cemeteries number one and two,” the commissioner shared, calling the project “a really important” one for the department.

Senator Franklin Johnson, meanwhile, tasked the department with paving all cemetery extensions for ease of access. “I noticed we had an extension of the King’s Hill Cemetery, but the road is not paved...you really can’t even get to that grave site when it’s raining in that area.” By way of reply, Mr. Gabriel explained that “it is something that was included originally when we were doing the expansion [but] because of cost prohibitions, we weren’t able to complete that.” DPW intends to put that portion of the project out for bid in the near future and is considering some “temporary fixes for some roadway networks.”

“We have to really pay homage and respect properly to our ancestors, and that starts with how we respect those that are in our cemeteries,” acknowledged Gabriel.