

Federal Funding Freeze Disrupts Library Renovations and Other Projects in the USVI

The Trump administration's federal spending cuts are delaying projects in the U.S. Virgin Islands, including library renovations. DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol told lawmakers that \$4 million in expected federal reimbursements is now on hold.

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The Charles W. Turnbull Regional Library in St. Thomas.

The Trump administration's cuts and abrupt pauses in federal spending continue to negatively impact work on the ground in the Virgin Islands. On Monday, V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol told lawmakers that some \$4 million in federal funding expected to have been received by DPNR as reimbursement is now paused. The stoppage,

according to Mr. Oriol, is currently affecting ongoing resilience work on the Charles W. Turnbull Regional Library in St. Thomas, among other projects.

Mr. Oriol, speaking to lawmakers on the Senate Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, said some grantor agencies recently informed DPNR of the frozen funding. The disruption in cash flow has already prevented DPNR from hiring at least one new team member, he disclosed. However, much of the money that the department expected to receive via the Inflation Reduction Act was dedicated to projects – including archival digitization and work to strengthen the roof of the Turnbull Library. Those two projects, Mr. Oriol said, were expected to be funded to the tune of \$3.25 million.

Revelation of the funding pause caused significant concern for lawmakers including at-large Senator Angel Bolques Jr., who questioned how long the freeze might last.

“As of last week, when I checked in with [the Insular Office], they told me that the situation has not changed,” Mr. Oriol responded. He, too, is “a little concerned,” as “we do not have a work around.”

As lawmakers learned from the commissioner, “the work on the roof of Turnbull is actually underway prior to the pause, so we need to get that particular portion paid.” The freeze has forced DPNR to hold back on issuing a notice-to-proceed to a contractor until the department knows “definitely that that money is available.”

DPNR’s funding woes when it comes to the territory’s libraries are not just on the federal level, however. A [21.8% reduction](#) in the department’s FY2025 budget will affect DPNR’s ability to adequately manage both the Turnbull Library and the Athalie Petersen Public Library once completed, said Commissioner Oriol. “The Division of Libraries, Archives and Museums receives almost 49% of our general fund allotment. Two and a half million of that goes into just salaries [that] we will not have once the Turnbull Library is completed,” he told lawmakers.

“We’ll only have four staff members to go in there. That’s a huge building... When the Peterson Library is finished a year from now, we will not have staff to open the Peterson Library unless we’re shifting employees between facilities and having a rotational schedule... We do not have the staff to open the two libraries simultaneously in St. Croix, and we will be severely short staffed in the operations of the Turnbull Library,” reported Mr. Oriol.

With a possible long-term reduction in funding for the libraries, the committee’s chair, Senator Hubert Frederick, predicted a future where leaders must get creative. “If it’s going to come to the point that we have to keep a new building closed... we need to juggle our workforce to make sure it opens,” he suggested. He learned from Mr. Oriol that each library could perhaps open for five days with a minimum of seven staff. However, the DPNR commissioner was careful to note that the Turnbull Library is much larger than both the Petersen Library and the already reopened Florence Williams Library.

“It’s a 40,000 square foot building. The children’s room, by itself, is the size of the Peterson library, so we have two individuals in there. It needs somebody dedicated to the computer room,” explained Commissioner Oriol, who also highlighted the need for specialists to oversee the Von Scholten archival collection.

“Seven [staff] for a 40,000 square foot facility? That’s pushing. This raises security concerns,” noted Frederick. A recent study indicated that the Turnbull Library would need at least thirteen staff to operate from 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. six days a week, Mr. Oriol noted.

By Frederick's own assessment, DPNR currently has no funding to pay for additional security, at least not already appropriated. "What you will see again in this year's coming budget cycle is we will once again submit a package that shows all of the needs for the library by itself," promised Mr. Oriol. DPNR predicts that it could cost "around \$5 million" to adequately fund the libraries on an annual basis.

The Turnbull Library is on track to be reopened by September 2025, while the Petersen Public Library may be under construction for another year.

Where other projects affected by the pause in federal funding are concerned, DPNR says like with the library work, there are no contingency plans. The University of the Virgin Islands was also expected to receive funds for a climate action project, however as Mr. Oriol explained to Senate President Milton Potter, "we would have to notify the university that we have to suspend the program due to the funds being suspended... We won't be able to execute the contract for the digitization on the archives, and we'll have to look for a different pot of funding, if one exists out there."

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