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## NOAA Tower Lease Withheld by Senate Committee Amid Health Concerns, Community Pushback

**Despite potential to improve weather forecasting and emergency alerts, lawmakers paused the 20-year lease, citing concerns over resident safety and the tower's proximity to homes and a high school.**

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What appeared to be a simple lease agreement to allow the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to install weather monitoring equipment on an existing telecommunications tower in Estate Nazareth was held in the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Tuesday, after several lawmakers expressed concerns about the tower's proximity to homes.

Bill 36-0062 is an act approving the lease agreement between the Government of the Virgin Islands and the United States Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), for “a portion of the telecommunications tower located on Parcel R-22

of Tract I Estate Nazareth.”

According to Vincent Richards, assistant commissioner in the Department of Property and Procurement, the lease will allow NOAA and the GVI to collect “atmospheric data” for the entire territory. The equipment attached to the existing telecommunications tower would provide the USVI with “optimum weather broadcast and Emergency Broadcast Systems, keeping them informed and prepared for the never-ending environmental changes affecting the area,” said Mr. Richards.

The twenty-year lease would attract an annual rent of \$1,200 a month, payable in monthly installments of \$100, the nominal fee that the Department of Property and Procurement assigns to certain leases including those between nonprofit entities and the GVI. “The data that they do collect is for the public good,” noted Mr. Richards.

Despite the benefits that the weather monitoring equipment is expected to bring to the territory still reeling from Hurricanes Irma and Maria, several lawmakers expressed concerns about the impact the equipment could have on nearby residents.

Sen. Ray Fonseca spent 5 minutes and 30 seconds of his 6-minute allotted time to probe for more information on the risks associated with installing NOAA’s equipment on the existing tower. “It’s no dangerous frequencies and no dangerous radio waves to affect the residents in the area’s health etc., right,” he asked Mr. Richards. Mr. Richards, who had indicated that the planned equipment would measure atmospheric pressure and the like, told Mr. Fonseca, “I’m not a subject matter expert on frequencies and radio waves.”

It became apparent that Fonseca’s hesitation stemmed from the DPP’s requirement that NOAA produce the necessary permits and remain in zoning compliance. “It led me to believe it’s not a regular tower... it led me to feel that it’s something going to be going on there that ain’t mentioned,” the lawmaker said. Still, he remained skeptical about the location, near the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School.

“That’s right up from the school. The kids are there, and we want to make sure that it’s not dangerous,” he added. “I’m sure that there are other locations that the feds can select that are not in a neighborhood... We have a lot of homes in the area.” The tower already hosts functioning telecommunications equipment, and the lawmaker did not make it clear what extra risk he believed adding weather-monitoring equipment would pose.

Fonseca eventually made a motion to hold the lease in committee at the call of the chair, a decision supported by all seven committee members.

Senator Marvin Blyden, who “thought it was a no-brainer first,” told his colleagues that he received information from Estate Nazareth residents that they are being pressured into accepting the project. “We cannot have our people being forced to sign waivers because of what can transpire to them in respect to the power,” he added. “I cannot, in good conscience, support that; it will be irresponsible of me,” declared Blyden.

“I appreciate all of that critical data that we need to be able to collect, but we have to start to look strategically in planning areas to put these towers,” added Senator Carla Joseph.

It is not clear what changes, if any, will be made when the lease returns to the committee for consideration once more, or whether the lease will even return to the committee floor for future consideration.

